

The role of the intranet at Lonmin Platinum: The perceptions of middle management

N Theunissen

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Key words:

Intranet, public relations, internal communication, two-way symmetrical communication, interactivity, middle management, stakeholder management, communication management

Abstract:

The rapid changes in the world of online technology during the last two decades brought along new challenges and opportunities for public relations practitioners. Literature has proven that the interactive capabilities of web-based technology have the possibility to build and maintain relationships with stakeholders and create two-way symmetrical communication opportunities. One such technology is an intranet, which could have an immense impact on an organisation's internal communication environment. If managed and applied correctly the intranet has the possibility to build two-way symmetrical relationships with an organisation's internal stakeholders – often described as one of the organisation's most strategic stakeholder groups.

In this applied research study, the contribution of an international mining organisation's intranet to internal two-way symmetrical communication was explored and described. An extensive literature study was conducted to determine how an intranet could contribute theoretically to two-way symmetrical communication. The empirical findings were obtained by means of two main research methods: a qualitative content analysis and semi-structured interviews with middle management employees. The content analysis described how the basic principles of two-way symmetrical communication were applied on the Lonmin Platinum intranet. The semi-structured interviews with middle management explored and described how they perceived and used the intranet with regard to two-way symmetrical communication.

It was concluded that the Lonmin intranet did not contribute to two-way symmetrical communication. A critical conclusion is that an intranet as a mediated communication medium could not contribute to two-way symmetrical communication if the internal communication climate does not facilitate the specific values related to the Excellence Theory and two-way symmetrical communication principles. Another conclusion is that Lonmin's intranet was too technologically focussed. There was no management of strategic communication or ownership, and as a result the intranet did not contribute to two-way symmetrical communication in the organisation.

It is suggested that future studies describe the contribution of the Lonmin intranet to two-way symmetrical communication after the communication department had commenced with strategic intranet management. The relation between the contribution of the intranet to two-way symmetrical communication in the organisation and the general communication climate could also be explored in future research studies.

Sleutelwoorde:

Intranet, skakelwerk, interne kommunikasie, tweerigting- simmetriese kommunikasie, interaktiwiteit, middelbestuur, belangegroepbestuur, kommunikasiebestuur

Opsomming:

Die snelle veranderinge wat die afgelope twee dekades in die wêreld van aanlyn-tegnologie plaasgevind het, het nuwe uitdagings en geleenthede aan skakelwerkpraktisyns gestel. Die literatuur het bewys dat webgebaseerde tegnologie se interaktiewe vermoë dit moontlik maak om langtermynverhoudings met belangegroepe te bou en te onderhou. Dit skep ook 'n klimaat vir tweerigting- simmetriese geleenthede. Een so 'n nuwe medium wat 'n geweldige groot impak kan hê op 'n organisasie se interne kommunikasie-omgewing, is 'n intranet. As 'n intranet reg aangewend en bestuur word, beskik dit oor die vermoë om tweerigting- simmetriese verhoudings met 'n organisasie se interne belangegroepe te skep. Daar word dikwels in die literatuur na dié belangegroep verwys as een van 'n organisasie se mees strategiese belangegroepe.

In hierdie toegepaste navorsingstudie word daar ondersoek en beskryf hoe 'n internasionale mynboumaatskappy se intranet bygedra het tot tweerigting- simmetriese kommunikasie. Die empiriese resultate is verkry deur van twee navorsingsmetodes gebruik te maak: 'n kwalitatiewe inhoudsanalise en semigestruktureerde onderhoude met middelbestuur. Die inhoudsanalise het beskryf hoe die basiese beginsels van tweerigting- simmetriese kommunikasie toegepas is op die Lonmin Platinum intranet. Die semigestruktureerde onderhoude het die persepsies van middelbestuur ondersoek ten opsigte van hoe hulle die intranet gebruik en beskou.

Dit is bevind dat die Lonmin intranet nie bygedra het tot tweerigting- simmetriese kommunikasie nie. 'n Baie belangrike gevolgtrekking wat gemaak is, is dat 'n intranet – as gemedieerde kommunikasiemedium – nie kan bydra tot tweerigting- simmetriese kommunikasie as die interne kommunikasielimaat van die organisasie nie die waardes van die *Excellence*-teorie en tweerigting- simmetriese beginsels fasiliteer nie. 'n Ander bevinding wat gemaak is, is dat die Lonmin intranet te veel gefokus het op die tegnologiese kant van die medium. Die afwesigheid van strategiese kommunikasiebestuur en algemene eienaarskap was verdere redes vir die intranet se onvermoë om 'n bydrae te maak tot tweerigting- simmetriese kommunikasie in die organisasie.

Aanbevelings vir toekomstige studies is om die intranet se bydrae tot tweerigting- simmetriese kommunikasie in die organisasie te meet, nadat die kommunikasie departement begin het om die intranet uit 'n strategiese oogpunt te bestuur. Die verband tussen die intranet se bydrae tot tweerigting- simmetriese kommunikasie in die organisasie en die algemene interne kommunikasielimaat kan ook ondersoek word in verdere navorsingstudies.

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Chapter 1: Orientation and problem statement

1.1 Introduction

The face of public relations has changed with the coming of the Internet and other web-based technologies. New media have opened the door for interactivity, immediateness, quickness and connectivity in an information-driven society. Public relations practitioners and academics are more than ever realising that new media can have a significant impact on stakeholder relationships.

The unique interactive nature of new media could revolutionise the way in which relationships with stakeholders are managed. Employees are one of the most important and strategic stakeholders of an organisation (Lubbe & Puth, 2002; Cutlip, Center & Broom, 1985; Grunig, Grunig & Dozier, 2002). Sound relationships with this stakeholder are therefore of critical importance for effective public relations. Good relationships are characterised by two-way and symmetrical patterns of communication (Grunig, Grunig & Dozier, 2002) – two concepts very closely related to interactivity.

A new medium which is aimed at an organisation's internal stakeholders and which offers the same interactive capabilities and unique characteristics as the Internet, is an intranet. An intranet could have a very positive impact on internal communication, especially because of its interactive and therefore also its two-way communicative nature. What the Internet has done for the world, an intranet can do for employees in an organisation. This mini-dissertation investigated to what extent an international mining company's intranet contributed to two-way symmetrical communication by describing middle management's perceptions of their organisation's corporate intranet.

In this chapter, the key concepts of the study are firstly defined. Secondly, the context of the study is briefly explained. Thirdly, the reader is orientated by an overview of the problem statement followed by the four specific research questions and research objectives. The chapter then gives a summary of the central theoretical argument in which this study is embedded and a brief description of the methodology that was followed to answer the research questions. Lastly, this chapter gives an overview of the rest of the chapters of this study.

1.2 Definition of key terms

1.2.1 Intranet

According to Banck and Nyström (2005) definitions that have been given for intranets focus either on the technological aspects of the medium or on its purpose and use. Authors have defined an intranet as the application of Internet technology, more specifically World Wide Web technology, to private/internal networks accessible only by members of a specific organisation (Murgolo-Poore & Pitt, 2000; Terplan, 2000;

Damsgaard & Scheepers, 1999). An intranet provides the same functionality as the Internet (Prendergast, Murgolo-Poore, Pitt & Berthon, 2000). It looks and acts like a web site (with Internet protocols) offering the same content and interactivity features (Anon, 2005), but it is made available only to the members of a closed organisation.

Watcher and Gupta's (1997:393) definition puts more emphasis on an intranet's purpose and use: "Intranets use Internet technologies to enhance employee productivity by the encouragement and facilitation of unimpeded communication between employees by sharing and documentation." A more simplified definition by Lynch (1997) is that an intranet is an internal Internet. With these definitions in mind, one can conclude that an intranet is a communication medium based on Internet technologies accessible only by members of a specific organisation within an internal network. The unique characteristics and theoretical principles of the Internet and World Wide Web are therefore applicable to an intranet, with the exception that it is not accessible to the whole world. Throughout this study Internet principles and characteristics will also be applied to intranets because of its similar nature.

1.2.2 Stakeholders or publics

According to Steyn and Puth (2000:4) the terms "stakeholders" and "publics" are often used when referring to "a group of individuals who are influenced by or who influence the organisation". They could either be inside the organisation (employees, unions, management etc.), or of an external nature (government, media, community members etc.). Steyn and Puth (2004:5) stress that although these two terms are often used synonymously, there is a subtle difference between a *stakeholder* and a *public*. According to Baskin, Aronoff and Lattimore (1997:11) a public is "a group of people who share a common problem or goal and recognise their common interest". The term "stakeholder" is used by practitioners to refine the concept of public to mean those with a vested interest or "stake" in the organisation (Baskin, Aronoff & Lattimore, 1997:11).

According to Schilling (2000:225), Freeman was the first author to introduce stakeholder theory in 1984 with his book *Strategic Management: a Stakeholder Approach*. When communication is practiced strategically according to Grunig (1992:12), practitioners communicate with *strategic publics* which many theorists have called *stakeholders*. Therefore it becomes evident that stakeholders are *strategic publics*.

In this study the term "stakeholder" would be used to define the group of individuals who are influenced by or influences the organisation, as this term defines a public in terms of its *strategic involvement* with the public relations practitioner.

1.2.3 Public relations

Many definitions have been given to public relations in past literature, some of which are inconsistent with one another. For the purpose of this study, a definition would be

based mainly on Grunig, Grunig and Dozier's (2002) view of public relations, which entails overall planning, execution and evaluation of an organisation's communication with both external and internal stakeholders. Grunig (1992:4) defines public relations as "the management of communication between an organisation and its publics". According to Naudé (2001) this definition is widely accepted because it focuses on the *relationship* between an organisation and its stakeholders, and not on marketing or making a profit, therefore it distinguishes public relations from the marketing function. To further understand the concept "public relations", however, one must have a good understanding of the models of public relations that were first identified by Grunig and Hunt (1984).

1.2.3.1 Models of public relations

Grunig and Hunt (1984) constructed four models to describe public relations as it has developed since the nineteenth century. These models serve as a "representation of reality" (Grunig & Hunt, 1984:21) to understand how public relations are practiced today. The four models are defined in terms of *direction* and *purpose*. "Direction" refers to the flow of the message, whether it is a one-way process (flowing strictly from the organisation as the source) or a two-way process (where both parties are involved in a dialogue). "Purpose" refers to whether the model is asymmetrical or symmetrical (the balance between the organisation and its stakeholders). These four models are discussed in chapter 1 because they form a significant part of the theory on which the rest of the study is based.

- *The press agency model*

In this model public relations serves as a propaganda tool. Practitioners communicate their view of the truth, often by not presenting the complete picture to stakeholders in order to persuade them as the organisation wants. This model marks the start of the public relations profession around the 1850s. The press agency model is used when an organisation strives for obtaining publicity, especially in the mass media (Dozier, Dozier & Grunig, 1995). It provides an asymmetrical, one-way view of public relations, and is primarily associated with the technician role of public relations (Lubbe & Puth, 2002).

- *The public information model*

The public information model is characterised by dissemination of information and tends to be the most frequently practised model by public relations practitioners (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). It had its origin in the 1900s when organisations required public relations practitioners to share information with the public in reaction to attacks from the press. The intent is not necessarily to be persuasive, but rather to share information about the organisation to the public. However, Naudé (2001) emphasises that although these "inhouse-journalists" conveyed the truth about their organisations, they conveniently informed the public only on positive news about the organisation rendering the model asymmetrical. Just like the press agency model, this is a one-way model of public relations, as it does not allow any feedback from receivers. It is also asymmetrical in nature (Lubbe & Puth, 2002).

- *The two-way asymmetrical model of public relations*

In the asymmetrical model of public relations practitioners use formative research to find out “what the public will accept and tolerate”. This model is based on establishing stakeholders’ needs in order to persuade them to react as the organisation wishes. The key word here is “scientific persuasion”. The model had its origin in the 1920s when Edward Bernays, a cousin of Sigmund Freud, applied behavioural and social science theory to his work. Although the flow of messages is regarded as two-way, this model is seen as unbalanced, because the feedback from stakeholders is used to manipulate them according to the organisation’s goals and desires, rather than involve them in a symmetrical two-way process (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Lubbe & Puth, 2002).

- *The two-way symmetrical model of public relations*

This model is said to be the most effective and ethical model for practising public relations (Grunig, Grunig & Dozier, 2002). According to Dozier, Grunig and Grunig (1995) the two-way symmetrical model is the only model that provides a public relations perspective aligned with social responsibility. As long as the dialogical process is ethical, the outcome should be ethical. The first three models were characterised as being asymmetrical because organisations did not change their behaviour as a result of public relations, but rather persuaded or changed stakeholders’ attitudes in order for the organisation to gain from the process. The two-way symmetrical model of public relations however, provides balance to the communication process between the organisation and its stakeholders. This model is based on true dialogue (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). Public relations practitioners serve as mediators between an organisation and its stakeholders. The key concept here is mutual understanding. Naudé (2001) explains that messages between an organisation practising the two-way symmetrical model of public relations could also be called interactive, particularly because of its dialogic nature.

Two-way symmetrical communication forms an integral component of Grunig, Grunig and Dozier’s (2002) *Excellence Theory*. The Excellence Theory will be more thoroughly explained in chapter 2 (section 2.6.2). However, for the purpose of this chapter it is important to note that the Excellence Theory and two-way symmetrical communication will lay the foundation for the central theoretical argument of the study (see section 1.7 of this chapter).

- *The mixed motive model*

The four abovementioned models, as was identified by Grunig and Hunt (1984), are widely known and accepted in public relations literature. It is, however, also important to be aware of another model of public relations, known as the *mixed motive model*. This model, according to Grunig, Grunig and Dozier (2002:370) focuses on “strategic symmetry”. In this model there is a strategic mixture of collaboration and advocacy. Therefore, a combination of two-way symmetric and asymmetric approaches is used in an integrated communication process. Because the two-way symmetrical model has been criticised as being too idealistic in practice, Dozier, Grunig and Grunig

(1995:19) claim that excellent organisations often practice a mixture of the two models where they “serve as advocates both for their organisations and for strategic publics” (stakeholders).

Each of the models that have been described in this section has its specific purpose in the public relations practice. Public relations practitioners often make use of more than one model, and may apply a combination of the models to their public relations programmes. One must keep in mind that each of the four models are important, but for the purpose of this study, the focus will be primarily on the two-way symmetrical model, because it has been described as the most ethical and effective model for practising public relations.

1.2.4 Internal communication

This concept is also referred to as “organisational communication”, “employee communication” or “employee relations” in some literature (Puth & Steyn, 2000; Baskin, Aronoff & Lattimore, 1997 & Lubbe & Puth, 2002). Internal communication is the establishment and management of positive relationships with an organisation’s employees. According to Grunig, Grunig and Dozier (2002) internal communication is one of the most important “specialities” of public relations and employees are one of an organisation’s key stakeholders.

1.2.5 Interactivity

Naudé (2001:43; adapted from a definition by Ha & James, 1998) describes interactivity as “the extent to which the communicator and the audience respond to, or are willing to facilitate each other’s communication needs”. The words “are willing to” highlight an important argument raised by Ha and James (1998). According to them it has been assumed in previous literature that the audience *wants* to be involved in two-way communication with the source, but according to the authors this is an invalid assumption. Sometimes the audience has a need for low levels of interactivity (such as browsing on a website) and in other instances the audience has a need for direct response (true interactivity). For the purpose of this study therefore, interactivity would be based on this definition because it relates to two-way symmetry, as it focuses on an audience’s or stakeholder’s lower and more advanced needs for interactivity.

1.3 The context of the study

The empirical part of the study was conducted at Lonmin Platinum’s Marikana operations in the North West Province. Lonmin is an international geographically dispersed mining organisation with approximately 25 000 employees. Its head office is based in the United Kingdom, with South African mining operations stretching from Marikana in the North West Province to Potgietersrus in the Limpopo Province. The large number of employees and the wide dispersion of offices and operations often make effective internal communication a difficult and challenging task.

Lonmin was characterised by an extreme autonomous corporate culture in the past. The level of interaction and free sharing of information between employees were limited and employees were unfamiliar with the idea of sharing information on an open system such as an intranet. According to a stakeholder perception survey conducted by the North West University (Naudé, Fourie, Van Heerden, Le Roux & Venter, 2004), feelings of mistrust, autonomy and a general one-way flow of messages were integral characteristics which employees associated with their working environment.

This started to change with the appointment of the new Chief Executive Officer (CEO), who introduced a tremendous transformation in the organisation, including a shift in the corporate culture from an autonomous culture to a more participative culture.

Many new initiatives were embarked on, including the development of a corporate intranet for Lonmin Platinum Mine. Initiated by the CEO and executed by the Chief Information Officer and some other members of the Information Technology (IT) department, the intranet saw the light in February 2005. It is also important to note that Lonmin Platinum had no communication department until June 2005 and that an effective communication management approach was therefore absent during the initiation, implementation and first development stages of the intranet. Because the communication department was not present in the initial strategic planning, development and implementation process, they could not be held responsible for the management deficiencies of the Lonmin intranet. The communication department was in operation for four months when this study was conducted.

Approximately 2 000 employees at Lonmin have access to the intranet. Among these 2 000 employees the intranet has the potential to have a significant impact on internal communication. The 2 000 employees with intranet access could be subdivided in lower management, middle management and top management segments. This study focused on the middle management segment. The motivation for focusing on middle management was mainly due to the fact that they are mostly office-based and could reap the most awards from an intranet. However, the motivation for using this segment of employees would be further described in the chapter on methodology (chapter 3).

The intranet could play a very significant role in enhancing internal communication among employees with access to computers, especially because they are operating from different areas and even from different countries. Lonmin has a wide variety of divisions and the intranet has the ability to enhance interaction and collaboration between these divisions in a quick and cost-effective manner. Most importantly, the intranet could play a tremendous role in improving relationships with the approximately 2 000 employees who have access to the intranet, *if* the intranet is effectively managed out of a two-way symmetrical perspective.

Lonmin Platinum's intranet is a fairly new initiative. The intranet site was officially launched in February 2005 and it was therefore still in its infant stage when the study was conducted. It was developed with the purpose "to establish a single interface to execute daily business functions, allow communication and collaboration between colleagues and to be a vehicle for an information-driven business", according to the Lonmin Intranet Implementation Project Charter (Van Schalkwyk, 2005).

1.4 Problem statement

The importance of well-managed relationships with employees and the benefits that well-informed internal stakeholders hold for the organisation are emphasised throughout public relations literature (Baskin, Aronoff & Lattimore, 1997; Cutlip, Center & Broom, 1985; Lubbe & Puth, 2002). According to Grunig (1992) employees are a strategic public to an organisation and communication with this strategic public (stakeholder) must be co-ordinated through integrated and effectively managed public relations programmes. The two-way symmetrical model of public relations provides the most ethical and effective framework for managing this relationship. It is also stated that symmetrical systems of internal communication increase the likelihood for individual and organisational job satisfaction (Grunig, 1992).

The two-way symmetrical model of communication is based on concepts like trust, credibility, openness, relationships, reciprocity, network symmetry, horizontal communication, feedback, adequacy of information, an employee-centred style, tolerance for disagreement and negotiation. Two-way symmetrical communication could be implemented either through mediated or interpersonal communication (Grunig, Grunig & Dozier, 2002).

In the context of Lonmin Platinum, where this intranet study was conducted, various mediated internal communication mediums have been implemented or is in the pipeline of being implemented. Two of these mediums include an internal newsletter and the production of internal news broadcasts. This study was preceded by the evaluation of Lonmin's internal newsletter and Lonmin's news broadcasts against the principles of two-way symmetrical communication. Another form of mediated communication that promises many positive contributions to effective internal communication is the intranet. As mentioned above, Lonmin's intranet was still in its infant shoes at the time the study was conducted. No formal research has been conducted on the organisation's intranet and the assumption is made that it is still fairly under-utilised and not reaching its optimal potential as a medium to establish positive relationships with and between employees.

Literature supports the theory that an intranet holds many advantages for an organisation. It improves efficiency and productivity, allows information sharing and collaboration across departments, reduces printing and distribution costs, and most importantly, it allows multi-directional internal communication (Tredinnick & Tilly, 2001; Cumming & Cuthbertson, 2001; Damsgaard & Scheepers, 1999; Murgolo-Poore & Pitt, 2000). It becomes evident that an intranet holds the potential to improve

internal communication. However, according to Stenmark (2003) the intranet as an internal communication medium is still under-utilised in many organisations, which implies that many intranets are managed ineffectively.

Although the intranet is a mediated communication medium, it differs from more traditional mass communication mediums such as newspapers or television. According to Naudé, Froneman and Atwood (2004) online technology is the most symmetrical form of mass communication. The symmetrical nature of new media lies in its unique characteristic namely interactivity. A strong correlation between interactivity and two-way symmetry has been emphasised in literature (Naudé, Froneman & Atwood, 2003).

The interactive capabilities of the Internet and therefore also of intranet sites, opens new ways to enhance two-way symmetrical communication in the internal organisational environment (Naude, 2001). If an intranet site is to be enhancing two-way symmetrical communication, two-way symmetric/dialogic concepts and interactivity should be purposefully applied to the content and design of the intranet. Against the background that many organisations do not use their intranet sites to its maximum potential, and the potential of the intranet to enhance two-way symmetrical communication with employees and improve internal relationships, this study focused on the application of two-way symmetrical principles on Lonmin Platinum's intranet.

In a geographically dispersed organisation like Lonmin a well-designed intranet could play a very important role in enhancing two-way symmetrical communication with and between the certain segments of employees who have access to the intranet. As indicated above, this study focuses on *middle management* as one of these important segments.

The general research question that arises from this discussion could be formulated as follows: *How does Lonmin Platinum's corporate intranet contribute to two-way symmetrical communication in the light of middle management's perceptions?*

1.5 Specific research questions

This general research question may be divided into the following more specific research questions:

- 1.5.1 How can an intranet establish two-way symmetrical communication?
- 1.5.2 How are the basic principles of two-way symmetrical communication applied on the Lonmin intranet?
- 1.5.3 How does middle management perceive and use the Lonmin intranet with respect to two-way symmetrical communication?
- 1.5.4 How can the Lonmin intranet be improved to enhance two-way symmetrical communication?

1.6 Research objectives

With respect to the specific research questions outlined above, the research objectives for this study are the following:

- 1.6.1 To describe how an intranet can establish two-way symmetrical communication in the organisation.
- 1.6.2 To explore to what extent the basic principles of two-way symmetrical communication are applied to the Lonmin intranet.
- 1.6.3. To describe middle management's perceptions and usage of the Lonmin intranet, specifically with regard to the intranet as a two-way symmetrical communication medium in the organisation.
- 1.6.4 To make recommendations in order to ensure that the Lonmin intranet enhance two-way symmetrical communication in the company.

1.7 Central theoretical argument

This mini-dissertation is based on Grunig, Grunig and Dozier's (2002) Excellence Theory. The Excellence Theory provides an ethical and effective framework for studying internal communication. A key concept of the Excellence Theory is two-way symmetrical communication, which can be applied through either interpersonal or mediated communication. In theory a strong correlation between two-way symmetry and interactivity has been found (Naudé, 2001; Naudé, Froneman & Atwood, 2004). With its interactive nature the intranet has the potential to improve two-way symmetrical communication in the organisation. In this study the principles of the Excellence Theory and two-way symmetrical communication have been used to determine to what extent the Lonmin Platinum intranet contributed to two-way symmetrical communication amongst middle management.

1.8 Research methodology

A combination of two data-collection methods were used to determine how the Lonmin intranet complied with the basic principles of two-way symmetrical communication and how middle management perceived the Lonmin intranet with respect to internal communication. These two methods were the following:

- A qualitative content analysis
- Semi-structured interviews with Lonmin middle management

A more detailed description of the two data-collection methods is given in chapter 3.

1.9 General overview and chapter layout

In the chapters to follow a literature study will be conducted (chapter 2) to describe how an intranet could establish two-way symmetrical communication in an organisation. Chapter 3 gives a broader explanation of the research methodology

that was used in this study. In chapter 4 the results of the qualitative content analysis and the responses of middle management are described and explored. Finally, all results and findings are concluded in chapter 5, in which recommendations are made on how to improve two-way symmetrical communication on the Lonmin intranet.

Chapter 2: Literature study

2.1 Introduction

Much has been written about intranets since 1996, which Yen and Chou (2001:81) describe as the “year of the intranet”. Literature does not under-emphasise the significant impact of an intranet on various business functions, including the improvement of internal communication and collaboration between departments. However, authors such as Stenmark (2003) and Banck and Nyström (2005) have already pointed out cases of under-utilisation and poorly managed and unstructured intranet sites; highlighting failures, concerns and challenges for intranet usage in organisations.

Literature was found focusing on intranet management and implementation; the issue of control on the intranet; content management and the technological applications of intranets and corporate portals (Damsgaard & Scheepers, 1999, 2000; Dias, 2001; Duane & Finnegan, 2003). The focus of these articles is primarily “technology-driven” and does not focus on its social influence on the organisation. These articles all portray an information management approach to intranets, rather than viewing the intranet from a public relations or communication perspective.

As much as has been written about intranets and its impact on the organisation, extensive attention has not been given to the intranet's contribution to two-way symmetrical communication. Various sources have underlined the unique capability of the Internet and the World Wide Web (WWW) to enhance dialogue, two-way symmetry and ultimately more interaction with stakeholders (Kent & Taylor, 1998; Naudé, 2001). A number of authors have linked intranet effectiveness to public relations, although not directly applying a two-way symmetrical worldview to intranet effectiveness. However, literature that applies concepts of dialogue and two-way symmetry directly to intranets are more scarce.

This chapter gives a general overview of intranets by focusing on its function in the organisation; current management approaches and the phases of intranet implementation. The emerging concerns, failures and challenges with respect to intranet usage will also be described briefly. With a general overview of intranets in mind, the literature study then turns its focus to public relations focussing on internal communication and intranet effectiveness, the Excellence Theory and how it links to two-way symmetry.

The unique interactive nature of web-based technologies is examined, as well as its relation to two-way symmetry and dialogue and how it ultimately could enhance beneficial relationships with stakeholders. In conclusion of significant sections in the literature study, specific theoretical statements are made in an attempt to answer the first research question. The chapter finally concludes with a generally summary of the literature.

2.2 The role of the intranet in organisations

2.2.1 The benefits of an intranet

There is no doubt that an intranet, when correctly applied and effectively managed, can play a significant role in successful internal communication. Literature highlights many communication-related benefits of this medium and organisations are more than ever realising that intranets empower their employees (Yen & Chou, 2001; Duane & Finnegan, 2003). The communication-related benefits of an intranet are the following:

- An intranet allows information sharing and collaboration across departments (Damsgaard & Scheepers, 1999) and improves vertical and horizontal communication in the organisation.
- The intranet enables employees to interact and actively communicate knowledge with each other (Banck & Nyström, 2005).
- The intranet allows “flexible, effective multidirectional communication which enables employees to get the correct information where and when they need it while providing information to each other and to the organisation” (Murgolo-Poore & Pitt, 2000:232).
- An intranet is rich in format, and unlike traditional media it could therefore include audio, video, text, graphics and interactive applications (Yen & Chou, 2001).

Hence, it is evident that an intranet is a *communication medium* and that it plays an integral role in internal communication. “The power of the intranet lies in its way of strengthening internal communications” (Yen & Chou, 2001:80), especially because control and security such as firewalls enables intranets to be of value to open internal communication. The intranet is also an excellent medium to communicate over time and space in the case of geographically dispersed organisations (Murgolo-Poore, Pitt & Ewing, 2002).

Other important benefits of the intranet, specifically from a business perspective, are its potential for cost reduction. It creates a virtual workplace, results in time saving, allows more flexibility and reduces training and software needs (McCollum, 2004). An intranet enhances a paperless environment and reduces printing costs (Cumming & Cuthbertson, 2001). The intranet enhances productivity because it enables employees to share documents in a cost effective way and is becoming an easy-to-use platform to run core business applications from (Watcher & Gupta, 1997). Thus the intranet becomes a tool to facilitate business processes.

According to Tredinnick and Tilly (2001) an intranet's role in the organisation should be defined in terms of *applications* (the uses to which the intranet is put) and *results* (the impact of these uses on organisation activities). It is important not only to focus on the intranet's role in achieving the desired results, but also on *how* these results would be achieved. Typical intranet applications include: centralised storage of information, the use of web technology to integrate existing communication, the

creation of databases and collaborative working through groupware. Results include: improved utilisation of existing information resources, enhanced communications and a more collaborative working environment (Tredinnick & Tilly, 2001).

Browsers, search capabilities and discussion facilities (which could be seen as typical applications, according to Tredinnick and Tilly, 2001) could enable interaction, knowledge sharing and reflection amongst users (Banck & Nyström, 2005), which are the desired end-results of these applications. Two-way symmetrical communication could also be described as a potential end-result that an intranet has to offer.

2.2.2 Various use-modes of intranets

The various uses to which intranets are put are important for understanding its function in the organisation. It can derive from active communication on a bulletin board (with high interactivity amongst users) to the passive reading of a notice. The motive can be related to daily work, or it can also be to investigate the site without a specific purpose in mind (Banck & Nyström, 2005).

Damsgaard and Scheepers (1999:335) identified five use-modes of intranets. These five use modes include:

- *Publishing*: where technology is used to publish information.
- *Transacting*: where the intranet is used to transact and co-ordinate other computer-based information systems through a unitary interface, therefore other systems and applications could run via the intranet (Banck & Nyström, 2005).
- *Interacting*: where the intranet is applied to establish interaction and communication between individuals and groups in the organisation.
- *Searching*: where technology is used to search for organisational information.
- *Recording*: where the intranet is used to record and organise collected knowledge in an organisation (e.g. frequently asked questions).

Initially an intranet is used mainly for the publication of static documents (which can be seen as a one-way communication process). This should not be viewed as a restriction of the technology, but rather “exhibits the learning involved in applying the technology” (Damsgaard & Scheepers, 2000:133). Banck and Nyström (2005) add three more categories to Damsgaard and Scheepers’ usage of intranets. They include *informative/communicative*, *static/dynamic*, and *service/working tool*. The latter of each category provides a more interactive approach to the usage of intranets. Intranets should be “*supporting information flows* and not be just information stores (or more typically silos)” (White, 2005:35), and should therefore aim to move beyond the publishing use mode of intranets to establish true interactivity and collaboration between employees.

2.2.3 Characteristics of intranets

Damsgaard and Scheepers (1999:335) describe the unique characteristics of intranet technology, saying that it is “multi-purpose and richly networked” and that it is an interactive and reflective medium. Later in this chapter more attention will be given to the intranet’s interactive nature (see section 2.7), but for now it is important to know that an intranet could be an interactive medium if it is applied for more than just the publishing use-mode.

Damsgaard and Scheepers (1999; 2000) also argue that an intranet could be regarded as “fragile” technology because it depends on network externalities, infrastructure and a critical mass of users and content in order for it to be successful. The latter implies that the more users an intranet has, the more populated it would be with content. However, the more content an intranet has to offer to users, the more users it would generate (thus leaving the intranet with a unique catch-22 situation regarding critical mass). These issues could also be seen as potential threats for the existence of intranets (see section 2.5).

Duane and Finnegan (2003) emphasise that the intranet is an evolving medium that increases with sophistication and complexity. They highlight another function of the intranet to the organisation: more empowerment to users. Banck and Nyström (2005:160) underline the fact that empowerment contributes to “increased knowledge about the organisation as well as forming a foundation for communication and collaboration”. Some of the variables of empowerment, described by Duane and Finnegan (2003), could be closely related to the concept of two-way symmetry (described later in this chapter). “The potential for empowerment via the Internet makes it likely to have a *balance* in power between the organisation and its publics”, according to Naudé, 2001.

Empowerment allows individuals to test and experiment with a variety of choices. It gives employees a sense of making a difference to the organisation – that their efforts directly affect the organisation’s performance. However, Duane and Finnegan (2003) emphasise that empowerment must be balanced with control, in order for an intranet not to evolve in a disorganised and uncontrolled medium. This leads to the identification of different approaches of how the content on an intranet could be “controlled”.

2.3 Intranet management: the issue of control

If not managed effectively an intranet could run the risk of becoming a disorganised mess. Watcher and Gupta (1997) identified four management approaches for managing intranets.

- *Laissez faire or decentralised model*

In this approach the intranet development process is left unregulated and users are free to publish what they want, with very little control over what is published. An

advantage of this approach is that it offers the user the ability to share information with the minimum amount of bureaucracy. It also speeds up development and could contribute to more relevant information, as users usually know which specific documents are relevant to their divisions' needs. A downside of this approach is that it overlooks strategic corporate applications, gathers redundant information and could become a display of inappropriate content (Tredinnick & Tilly, 2001; Watcher & Gupta, 1997).

- *Centralised model*

This approach defines clear policies and procedures to control content contribution on the intranet with a central person in the organisation to develop web material and contribute content. Content development is thus seen as a more authoritative and centralised process. It is easy to agree with Watcher and Gupta (1997) when they say that this approach undermines the natural benefits of HTML and other intranet technology. Watcher and Gupta (1997:397) point out that "part of the appeal of the Web is the ease of learning its technology and the capability afforded to users to exercise control over their own resources". Although this approach offers more consistency to the intranet and more control to the content, it could limit creativity, lacks responsiveness and timeliness and may require additional human resources to maintain the site. Moreover, this approach seems to be directly the opposite of what web-based technology is capable of: involving users to actively take part in the medium (Tredinnick & Tilly, 2001; Watcher & Gupta, 1997).

- *Mixed model*

The mixed model incorporates centralised and decentralised approaches. Policies and procedures are formulated and it is up to individual users to use intranet technology within the specified restrictions. However, overly restrictive policies could discourage individual users to contribute content and that could lead to a less populated intranet site (Tredinnick & Tilly, 2001; Watcher & Gupta, 1997).

- *Support services model*

This model focuses on supporting users in their developmental efforts. The approach increases users' developmental efforts through the *provision of services* by the IT department. The supporting of services leverage efforts to core business functions. In a "joined dialogue" between the IT department, users and management, there must be decided on which services to provide to users. Although this approach is more focused on the development and implementation phase of intranet management; by IT providing users with hardware, software and training to manage their own intranets, "the type and level of services will change over time as users progress through the learning curve" (Watcher & Gupta, 1997:398). Therefore IT's role to provide a service to users will be continuous as the intranet evolves. Watcher and Gupta (1997) describe this approach as the better one of the four models. Cooley (1999) notes that computer industries had the most interactive websites, according to a survey of a hundred Fortune 500 companies. As built-in interactivity features require a high level of technical proficiency, it is understandable that the websites of computer industries have high interactive capabilities. The IT department is the

obvious division to develop interactive systems and core enterprise applications, associated with the higher use-modes of intranets and should provide such applications as a “service” to the organisation in order for the intranet to obtain higher use-modes with more interactive capabilities.

Stenmark (2003), however, criticises the current intranet management literature. He argues that a great deal of research has been put into diffusion and adoption of intranets, but that literature does not convincingly explain why organisational members do not use their intranets. Lacking substantial evidence, authors tend to blame under-utilised intranets on poor structuring which is a result of weak management control, but, he points out, that did not stop the WWW from evolving. He suggests that alternative interpretations of standard intranet management literature must be sought.

If these four management approaches are examined out of a two-way symmetrical perspective, naturally the centralised model seems the least applicable to the two-way symmetrical model, as it is authoritative in nature and undermines collaboration and free sharing of information. Generally, it seems one-way in nature. The decentralised and mixed model would play a more successful role in increasing participation and two-way flow of messages. In order for two-way symmetrical principles to be present the organisation as a whole should be able to contribute content, as such an approach would increase participation. Therefore, a mixed model or decentralised model seems to be more applicable to two-way symmetrical communication principles.

Watcher and Gupta's (1997) fourth management style seems more “tactical” in nature (see section 2.6.4). In this approach the IT department provides a technological service to users. Because it is lacking a strategic view to the intranet, this approach could be criticised as less two-way symmetrical in nature. Later in this chapter, an alternative management approach to the intranet is identified, based on Stenmark's (2003) suggestion.

2.4 Intranet implementation and phases

In a study conducted by Damsgaard and Scheepers (2000) a stage model for intranet implementation and management has been presented. According to this model intranet implementation is based on four stages: intranet initiation, intranet contagion, intranet control and intranet integration. In all four stages three existential crises must be overcome (refer to section 2.5) for the intranet to be successful.

During the initiation phase, the intranet is introduced to the organisation. This stage requires “technological champions” to encourage intranet use in the organisation and obtain a critical mass. The initiation stage is characterised by the publishing use-mode of intranets.

During the second stage a critical mass has been obtained partly, but the challenge now is to maintain it by applying interactive functions such as search engines or discussion groups to the site, to avoid a situation where employees find it interesting or entertaining, but without any substance or use (Damsgaard & Scheepers, 2000:140).

The third stage, namely intranet control, is a critical stage in intranet implementation. It is within this stage that the intranet runs the risk of becoming unstructured and disorganised. The focus now should be on the quality of content and not as much the quantity. Damsgaard and Scheepers (2000) explain that broken links and unstructured content could create mistrust and could easily prompt employees to use other information channels. Thus, without procedures, policies, routines and tight control the intranet may run the risk of being unsuccessfully implemented in the organisation. Content and functionality must be streamlined in this stage. The fourth stage – described as the ideal stage by Damsgaard and Scheepers (2000) – is when the intranet becomes integrated with daily business functioning.

Duane and Finnegan (2003) presented seven growth stages of an intranet, although varying from Damsgaard and Scheepers's stage model, it also shows that interactivity is not obtained overnight and is associated with further stages of the intranet implementation process. It is therefore important to realise that the newer an intranet is, the less interactive it would probably be.

2.5 Emerging challenges and concerns

Although a powerful tool in the organisation, some literature already describes intranets as being under-utilised and not reaching its full potential in the organisation (Stenmark, 2003; Damsgaard & Scheepers, 1999).

One of the main reasons for failures concerning implementation, development and acceptance is because more attention is given to the technological side of an intranet, rather than to the *human side* (Banck & Nyström, 2005; Yen & Chou, 2001). This view is also stressed by Leonard (2005) when he argues that the poor use of intranets is more often related to "soft issues" (such as communication and collaboration), rather than to the technical aspects of intranets. Yen and Chou (2001) argue that an intranet is used by people and that it would be unsuccessful if its primary focus is not employees, even though the intranet provides state-of-the-art technologies. Banck and Nyström (2005:155) highlight a critical aspect: "The social context is important and a more integrated socio-technical view is critical to avoid separation of social behaviour from technology."

Furthermore, literature that focuses on the information management angle of intranets generally refers to organisation members using the intranet as "users", whereas intranets described out of a public relations or communication perspective refer to intranet users as "employees". True to information technology jargon they are in fact *users*. However, viewing these organisation members out of a public relations

perspective the “users” become more than just users, they become a very strategic stakeholder. They become *employees*: “users” with specific information needs.

In a study of intranet usage in governmental organisations, conducted by Cumming and Cuthbertson (2001) it was found that 80% of respondents were unable to use the intranet. Yen and Chou (2001) highlights training as a possible threat for the intranet. State-of-the-art technologies mean absolutely nothing if employees do not know what they can offer and how to utilise them optimally. Some employees are resistant to change and may therefore refuse to learn and catch-up with new technology, unless proper training is provided. The importance of training and education programmes for employees are also raised by Duane and Finnegan (2003) and is seen as an empowerment tool. “Training is important when you are setting up an intranet especially if you want users to feel they have a contribution to make” (Duane & Finnegan, 2003:147).

In addition, Banck and Nyström (2005) found discrepancies between the content provided on intranets and the actual use thereof. In some of the cases they studied, functions affiliated with higher use modes were not used although available on the intranet. A reason for these discrepancies could possibly be that employees do not know *how* to use the functions provided by higher use-modes, because of their complexity. Higher use modes on the intranet are more interactive and therefore one can also conclude that interactivity features on the intranet are often not optimally used, due to a lack of training.

Three “existential crises” that the intranet must overcome in order to be successfully implemented are highlighted by Damsgaard and Scheepers (2000). The first crisis is the intranet’s dependence on resources that should be in place before intranet implementation. Secondly, a crisis revolves around the need for obtaining a critical mass of users and content (as explained earlier). The third crisis is of specific importance for this study and emphasises the importance of proper planning and compilation of policies and procedure in order for the content on the intranet to be recent and useful (therefore answering in employees’ needs).

Based on authors’ suggestions that intranets should be focused on the human aspect of the medium and that alternative management approaches for intranets should be investigated, the discussion is now shifted towards a public relations view of web-based technologies, specifically intranets. This aspect forms the basis of this study. Before the discussion proceeds, however, the preceding section is summarised with the following specific theoretical statement:

Specific theoretical statement 1:

The literature examined in this section emphasised that the technological focus on intranets tends to be too strong and that a more integrated socio-technical approach to intranets is necessary. The intranet is often under-utilised by employees, due to a strong focus on its technical functions, rather than its communication role. Many

interactive functions on the intranet remain unused due to a lack of understanding thereof and discrepancies often occur between the content provided on the intranet and the actual uses thereof. However, it is also important to note that interactivity increases as the intranet evolves and becomes more utilised by employees.

It could be argued that in order for an intranet to be more interactive and establish two-way symmetrical communication in the organisation, management must put emphasis on its *communication or social impact*. A first step towards doing so is to provide employees with training in order for them to optimally use interactive functions on the intranet.

2.6 Public relations, internal communication and the Excellence Theory

There has been a tremendous shift in public relations theory from a journalistic, dissemination of information approach of public relations to a relationship building approach. More and more public relations scholars and practitioners are defining public relations as the *management of relationships* between organisations and its stakeholders (Brunning & Ledingham, 2000; Swart & Verwey, 2003). One key relationship that should not be neglected by public relations practitioners is that of positive relationships with employees (Lubbe & Puth, 2002; Cutlip, Center & Broom, 1985; De Bussy, Ewing, Pitt, 2003). Grunig (1992) has identified employees as one of the organisation's most strategic stakeholders, if not *the* most strategic. Well-informed employees who are valued in the organisation are more satisfied (Grunig, 1992; Murgolo-Poore & Pitt, 2000) and in turn tend to be more productive. Organisations are realising that sound internal communication is central to business efficiency, effectiveness and success (Tourish & Hargie, 1998:53).

2.6.1 Internal communication and the intranet

Although there seems to be a substantial amount of literature supporting the Internet's ability to enhance dialogue and two-way symmetry with stakeholders, literature on an *intranet's* role specifically to enhance dialogue and two-way symmetry in the organisation is scarcer. Murgolo-Poore, Pitt and Ewing (2002) argue that even though the effect of new technologies on employees should have an even more deep-seated effect than on external stakeholders, this aspect tends to receive less attention from authors.

The role of the intranet as a critical public relations medium to communicate with internal stakeholders has been established (Prendergast, Murgolo-Poore, Pitt & Berthon, 2000). Since the mid-1990s there has been a dramatic shift towards the use of new media in employee communication programmes (Gordon, 1998). Intranets have emerged as a major tool to enhance communication between management and employees (De Bussy, Ewing & Pitt, 2003). The actual uses of intranets still vary, however, from being "just another medium on which to publish information to fully developed knowledge management systems" (Murgolo-Poore & Pitt, 2000:236). Although an intranet has been established as critical public relations

medium to communicate with employees, Panteli, Tsiourva and Modelly (2005:20) argue that a *need is emerging to redefine an intranet's role from a declarative (one-way) communication medium to an interactive (two-way) medium.*

Although employees have always communicated with each other within an organisational setting, they have not always done so effectively. According to Murgolo-Poore and Pitt (2000) one of the reasons for this is because traditional media did not always lend itself to flexible multi-directional communication and flow of messages. The intranet with its interactive nature provides a way to communicate more effectively with employees. In this study a two-way symmetrical approach to internal communications is seen as the most effective and ethical approach. Therefore "effective" internal communication is only truly effective if it meets the principles of two-way symmetry. Furthermore, it could be added that an effective intranet is truly effective if it complies with two-way symmetrical communication principles (see section 2.8).

2.6.1.1 Intranet effectiveness

Because of the lack of literature supporting a public relations perspective on intranet effectiveness (see section 2.6.1) Murgolo-Poore, Pitt and Ewing (2002) developed a 15-item checklist to measure intranet effectiveness particularly in a public relations context.

The 15 items of the intranet effectiveness checklist were divided into three dimensions. These three dimensions are *operations*, *culture* and *facilitation*. The operations dimension refers to the extent to which an intranet impacts the way in which the organisation operates, such as changing internal communications and saving resources like time, money and facilities. Another item in this category is that the intranet should be viewed by employees as an integral part of their daily jobs. It should assist employees to work more effectively by bringing them together and employees should view the intranet as an organisational tool without which they would not be able to perform their daily tasks.

The culture dimension refers to the items that relate to how an intranet impacts on organisational culture. In the culture dimension the intranet should become a solution for bringing people together. It should provide a major cultural revolution, allow a global community to develop and its overall aim should be to make organisation members better communicators.

The facilitation dimension refers to how an intranet facilitates collaboration and co-operation between employees. In this dimension the items include the intranet as a tool to foster collaboration and to implement business strategy. Employees talk about the intranet's impact on the organisation, it brings products and services to market much quicker. It is seen as a way to collaborate, design and develop new products and services and it makes employees feel like a significant part of the company.

When these 15 items are viewed in the light of Grunig and Hunt's (1984) two-way symmetrical model of public relations, there seems to be many characteristics of an effective intranet that coincides with two-way symmetrical principles. Effective intranets are in the first instance part of employees' daily work functions and operations (the first dimension of intranet effectiveness), but more importantly, an effective intranet correlates with two-way symmetrical principles such as making employees feel valued and establishing a corporate culture of participation, interaction and facilitation.

Leonard (2005) provides empirical weight to the intranet effectiveness checklist that was developed by Murgolo-Poore, Pitt and Ewing (2002). Leonard (2005) found that an intranet as technology has the highest influence on collaboration between departments in the organisation, meaning that employees use the system and become contributors thereto to enhance its content and value. By using the intranet effectiveness scale he found that an intranet could impact significantly on an organisation's communication culture, it also impacts positively on collaboration and could be a catalyst for change in the organisation.

2.6.1.2 Technological connectivity vs organisational connectivity

Panteli, Tsiourva and Modelly (2005) argue that connectivity and interactivity are key features of effective intranets. They distinguish between technological connectivity and organisational connectivity. The former refers to the way the intranet relates and is linked to other information systems that have an impact on its own functionality and effectiveness. Technological connectivity correlates with the transacting use-mode of intranets (refer to section 2.2.2), where the intranet is used as a medium to run or link other technological applications via a unitary interface. Technological connectivity focuses more on the Information Technology side of intranets and not on its social or communication side.

However, in order for *true interactivity* to be obtained, according to Panteli, Tsiourva and Modelly (2005), organisational connectivity must also be in place. Organisational connectivity refers to when employees "across different departments and hierarchical levels share a willingness to communicate and engage with each other, crossing in this way boundaries that have traditionally constrained communication and collaboration" (Panteli, Tsiourva & Modelly, 2005:17). Organisational connectivity relates to two-way symmetrical principles because of the fact that employees across various departments and hierarchical levels are enabled to communicate with each other through the intranet. Organisational connectivity is therefore a function of the organisation's culture and communication climate.

If the intranet is linked to other information systems (technological connectivity) and the organisation members are communicating vertically and horizontally with each other (organisational connectivity) higher interactivity would be expected on the intranet, according to Panteli, Tsiourva and Modelly (2005). Therefore, true interactivity could only be obtained if the intranet shows characteristics of technological *and* organisational connectivity.

2.6.1.3 Dissemination of information

Prendergast, Murgolo-Poore, Pitt and Berthon (2000) have proven that the effectiveness of the intranet impacts significantly on an organisation's ability to disseminate information, relating the latter to the intranet effectiveness scale. The less effective an intranet is, the weaker its ability of information dissemination. In their article Prendergast, Murgolo-Poore, Pitt and Berthon (2000) acknowledge the shortcoming of not considering the effects of information dissemination on the organisations ability to *respond*. When viewed in the light of Grunig and Hunt's (1984) models of public relations this aspect of *response* would add a more symmetrical view to the intranet and is more in line with the intranet being a tool to establish *dialogue* in the organisation.

The results of Banck and Nyström's (2005) study on intranet usage in five Swedish organisations indicate that intranets are poorly matured and that the main use mode of the intranets that were studied, were "publishing". "The underlying philosophy of the intranets seems to be self-information rather than informing others" (Banck & Nyström, 2005:153). The publishing use-mode correlates with the intranet being an information dissemination tool and therefore relates to the public-information model of public relations (as described in chapter 1) and not the two-way symmetrical model of communication. Based on the description of the five use-modes in section 2.2.2 and the preceding discussion, the second specific theoretical statement is made:

Specific theoretical statement 2:

In order for an intranet to achieve two-way symmetrical communication, it must move beyond the publishing use mode of intranets, and should aim to achieve more interactive use-modes. The publishing use-mode correlates with the public information model to public relations, and is therefore not two-way or symmetrical in nature. The transacting use-mode offers limited interactivity, because it is characterised only by technological connectivity (therefore its linkage to other information systems). However, if an intranet is operating in the interacting, searching and recording use-modes, it becomes truly interactive and therefore more symmetrical in nature. An effective intranet shows characteristics of two-way symmetrical communication and a two-way symmetrical intranet is characterised by organisational connectivity.

2.6.2 The Excellence Theory and two-way symmetrical communication

To get a full understanding of two-way symmetrical communication, which is the focus of this study, the Excellence Theory, in which two-way symmetry is embedded, is explained below. The Excellence Theory consists of 20 key characteristics that distinguish excellent from less-than excellent public relations. To better describe the Excellence Theory, Dozier, Grunig and Grunig (1995) presents three spheres of communication excellence: the knowledge core, shared expectations in the middle of the sphere and a participative culture at the back of the sphere. Figure 2.6.2 is a visual representation of this sphere.

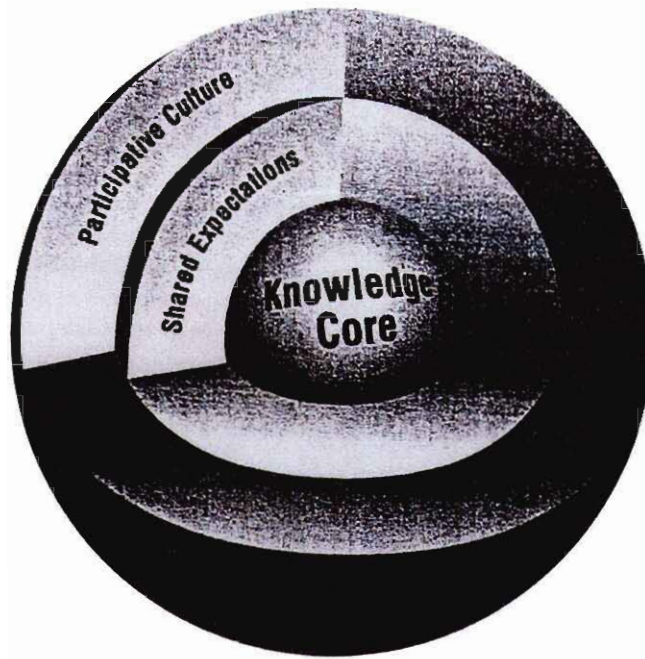


*Figure 2.6.2: The sphere of communication excellence.
Source: Dozier, Grunig and Grunig (1995).*

The knowledge core entails that an excellent public relations department requires strategic communication management, and not only technicians who can provide stakeholders with information (associated with more one-way approaches of public relations). The distinguishing aspect of this sphere is communication managers' knowledge to execute two-way symmetrical communication programmes.

Shared expectations refer to communication managers' partnerships with other dominant coalitions in the organisation. Murgolo-Poore and Pitt (2000) suggest that for effective internal communication to be in place communication managers must form alliances with all internal departmental managers. In organisations with excellent public relations programmes communication managers' input are valued by dominant coalitions (Grunig, 1992). In excellent organisations dominant coalitions' base their decisions on the communication department's research on stakeholders. In the case of an intranet, a typical coalition should develop between the communication manager and the head of the IT department. The IT manager must use the input from the communication department in order to excel in the technological side of the intranet.

The final sphere of the Excellence Theory is based on a participative corporate culture. Excellent organisations value teamwork, innovation and new ideas and involve employees in decision making. Hall (1995) emphasises the importance of mutual understanding and shared meaning between management and employees, especially in the South African context. Some of the factors influencing mutual understanding are closely related to a participative culture, such as management-worker interaction, trust, cultural diversity, communication networks and participation.

Trust and mutual respect is overall seen as key values to solid relationships with employees: "If an organisation is going to have long-term success it must foster clear, open, symmetrical communication lines with this valuable asset (employees)" (Murgolo-Poore & Pitt, 2000:233).

However, it needs to be established how an organisation gains that trust. The answer should be in two-way symmetrical communication, as it is based on principles such as trust, credibility, openness, relationships, reciprocity, network symmetry, horizontal communication, feedback, adequacy of information, an employee-centred style, tolerance for disagreement and negotiation (Grunig, 1992:558). The goal of excellent public relations "is mutual understanding and two-way communication (dialogue), as opposed to other models of public relations where persuasion or the dissemination of information is the main goal" (Naudé, 2001:22). Therefore excellent communication managers should practice two-way symmetrical communication.

Grunig (1992:530) relates the internal communication system of an organisation to communication excellence: "It functions as a necessary condition for excellent public relations programmes." Grunig also conclude that internal communication increases employees' job satisfaction, as long as it is based on principles of symmetrical communication. Two-way symmetrical communication could be implemented either through mediated or interpersonal communication. Therefore one can assume that if mediated communication (such as an intranet) is based on two-way symmetrical principles, the medium could increase employees' job satisfaction, which in turn increases production and ultimately lead to more excellent public relations.

2.6.3 New technology and strategic relationship management

As mentioned earlier Stenmark (2003) suggested that for the intranet to be better understood and utilised as a *strategic tool* future research should allow questioning of standard management literature and seek alternative interpretations. According to Watcher and Gupta (1997) any developmental efforts on an intranet is useless without active and effective management. This leads to the question of what could be described as "active and effective" intranet management.

Managing the intranet from a two-way symmetrical perspective, based on Grunig's Excellence Theory, could provide an alternative interpretation to intranet management. As the core sphere of the Excellence Theory indicates, an important variable of excellent public relations is to have a strategic communications manager in charge of the public relations department, equipped with the know-how to implement two-way symmetrical communication (either through interpersonal or mediated communication).

Swart and Verwey (2003) emphasise the importance of strategic relationship management. They argue that the "information revolution" led organisations to a new business model with interconnectivity as its ultimate objective. This approach values employees as important resources and the recognition of interrelationships within

and outside the organisation. The ultimate goal of public relations is to build mutually beneficial relationships with key stakeholders (Bruning & Ledingham, 2000). Due to the significant growth of new media, "communication is at a level where virtual relationships could develop" (Swart & Verwey, 2003:84). Therefore, the information era enabled communication managers to develop mutual beneficial relationships through technology (e.g. the intranet).

The relationship management perspective is based on a balance between the interest of the organisation and the interest of the public (Bruning & Ledingham, 2000; Swart & Verwey, 2003), thus showing strong correlation with the two-way symmetrical model of communication and the Excellence Theory.

One way to obtain a balance in power between the organisation and its stakeholders is through research. Research and planning is a very important facet of communication strategy and is often used to *develop* strategy (Botan, 1997; Steyn & Puth, 2000). Therefore one can argue that public relations could only be applied at strategic level when the two-way asymmetrical or two-way symmetrical model of public relations are practised, because these are the only models based on research. However, in the asymmetrical model of public relations research is used to formulate messages that try to influence stakeholders' behaviour. In the symmetrical model of public relations, research is used to identify stakeholders' needs and identify their concerns. Therefore the two-way symmetrical model is in essence the only strategic research-based model to create a balance in power between the organisation and its stakeholders.

Swart and Verwey (2003) indicate that the use of new technology is not widely utilised in relationship management by South African public relations professionals. However, when new communication technology is used, it is more often applied at the tactical level, rather than the strategic level. In other words, South African public relations professionals more often use the new technology for one-way communication programmes, where research and planning and general strategy are lacking.

According to Gordon (1998) there is a tremendous need for the development of an even more strategic approach to internal communications and for employee communication managers to be part of strategic decision making in the organisation. Murgolo-Poore and Pitt (2000) highlight the importance of CEO's to be believers in the intranet and to be the driving force of new technology use in the organisation. This aspect is also an important factor of the Excellence Theory. Grunig, Grunig and Dozier (2002) emphasise the importance of CEO's to encourage innovation and the use of new technology. They are often the primary driving force of a company's corporate culture.

2.6.4 A theoretical approach to Internet strategy

In a non-empirical study, Steyn, Grobler and Cilliers (2005) strive towards developing a theoretical framework for Internet strategy. According to them the Internet is a medium still in search of a strategy. Although public relations practitioners realise the potential benefit of the medium for reaching organisational goals, they are uncertain of its strategic applications and possibilities for the business.

Too often "online presence" is seen as enough, without realising that the Internet should have well-defined goals in place to establish good relationships with stakeholders. Tactics are often confused with strategy, which leads to focusing on the technology, rather than on the medium's strategic abilities in facilitating balanced relationships with stakeholders. The Internet is still primarily associated with the technician role of public relations (Naudé, Froneman & Atwood, 2004; Steyn, Grobler & Cilliers, 2005).

Steyn, Grobler and Cilliers's (2005) theoretical findings indicate that the Internet could enhance communication excellence and although the initial application of the Internet was one-way, some organisations have started to take advantage of its dialogic/interactive capabilities to foster two-way communication. Based on strategy theory, the authors found that functional strategy refers to the Information Technology department's role that they are playing in managing the Internet, where the focus is on the technology rather than on its communication function. With regard to corporate communication, Internet strategy is seen as the operational strategy, thus conveying key messages to strategic stakeholders and building two-way symmetric relationships. Information Technology, as a functional area, should manage the technology. However, applying Internet strategy to an operational level means that practitioners must for example use the Internet for research purposes (to gain more information from stakeholders). Using web-based technology for research purposes implies that the communication manager must "identify trends and issues that have consequences for stakeholders, evaluate their impact, set priorities and prepare action plans and pro-active responses in the online-world" (Steyn, Grobler & Cilliers, 2005:42).

Two-way symmetrical communication cannot be obtained if an intranet is managed solely by the IT department. This is simply because the IT department does not employ communications and public relations experts. Excellent communication managers have the expertise to apply two-way symmetrical principles in mediated communication such as the intranet. Therefore, IT's role should be to provide a service to *users* and to the communication department (as indicated by the support services model). They have the technical expertise to develop impressive interactive applications that could be integrated with business processes. However, the crux of the matter is, communication managers must build a *relationship* with *employees* (not users) by applying two-way symmetrical principles to the intranet.

As Tredinnick and Tilly (2001) defined an intranet's role in the organisation in terms of *applications* and *results*, one can describe the IT department's role as being responsible for creating the applications on the intranet (which ideally must be interactive of nature). However, the communications department must play the overall regulating, facilitating and managing role by achieving the desired result: two-way symmetrical communication and mutual beneficial relationships with stakeholders. This could be summarised in the third theoretical statement:

Specific theoretical statement 3:

It becomes evident in literature that new technology has enabled communication managers to establish "virtual relationships" with stakeholders. These relationships should be balanced, thus it should be two-way in nature. Two-way symmetrical and asymmetrical patterns of communication tend to be the most strategic communication approaches because it is based on research.

In South African public relations, communication managers have not frequently applied new technology as a relationship building tool with stakeholders. However, when they used it to manage relationships it was more often at *tactical level* (based on one-way approaches and associated with the technician role of public relations), rather than *strategic level*. Two strategic approaches could be applied to web-based technology:

- *Functional strategy*

This refers to the Information Technology's department role to the intranet. Functional strategy refers to the management of the *technology* itself. It focuses on the IT department's ability to establish and maintain interactive applications on the intranet and to provide a service to users (see the support services model). It is also referred to as a tactical approach to new technology and is one-way in nature.

- *Operational strategy*

Operational strategy is two-way in nature, as it is based on research and feedback. It is within this strategic leg of web-based technology where the technology is used to establish and maintain mutual beneficial relationships with stakeholders, and where there is a balance in power between the organisation and its different stakeholders. *In order for an intranet to be two-way symmetrical in nature excellent communication managers must follow an operational strategy to intranet management.*

2.7 Web-based technologies' unique interactive nature

A breakthrough in the communications revolution is that of *mediated interactive communication* (Van Dijk, 1999). According to Van Dijk (1999) "new media" and "interactive media" are often used synonymously. The Internet differs from traditional mass media because of its unique interactive nature (Naudé, 2001). However, it shares certain mass communication characteristics because it is an open, public impersonal medium (Steyn, Grobler and Cilliers, 2005). This allows the Internet to serve both as a mass communication medium or an interactive one-on-one

communication medium, depending on which model the organisation's communication is based. It could thus be applied as a one-way or a two-way medium. The demassification aspect of new media allows messages to be specifically tailored for certain audiences and allow interested audiences to be engaged in interactive communication with the source of the message (Botan, 1997). The outcomes of interactive communication are engagement in communication and relationship building between an organisation and its stakeholders (Ha & James, 1998).

According to Panteli, Tsiourva and Modelly (2005), there is relatively little research that provides an understanding of the *intranet* as an interactive medium. However, because the technology of the Internet and intranets is similar (as defined in chapter 1) many of the theoretical principles of interactivity could also be applied to intranets.

Building interactive features into one's site has more than one advantage to the organisation. Ghose and Dou (1998) found that interactive applications and functions contribute greatly to the attractiveness of the site. It adds to the enjoyment of the users, thus leading them to "stay longer" when they visit the site. An attractive site also carries the possibility to be included into a list of the top 5% best websites. Ghose and Dou (1998) identify the Lycos Top 5% to be such a list with substantial credibility. It is not only World Wide Web sites that could be counted onto such lists. Effective intranets could be awarded with similar awards. The Nielsen Norman Group, a design consulting firm claiming to be experts in the field of usability design, annually rewards the top ten intranets of businesses' around the world. According to Naudé (2001) being included in such a list could have a very positive impact on the organisation's corporate image.

Ha and James (1998:461-463) identified five dimensions of interactivity: playfulness, choice, connectedness, information collection and reciprocal communication. These dimensions could serve as a guideline to measure interactivity on an intranet. The reciprocal dimension, specifically, is closely related to the two-way symmetrical model of communication. Although the *application* of these dimensions to intranets are different than from applying it to the Internet because the audience and the goals vary; the desired end-results would be the same: balanced relationships with stakeholders through two-way symmetrical communication.

- *Playfulness*

Humans have always spent a great amount of time on playing games and entertaining themselves. Websites must not only provide information to users, but also be able to entertain them. The playfulness dimension of interactivity gives excitement and psychological gratification to the user. Entertainment is seen as an important facet of successful websites. Play could be seen as the user communicating with him or herself. Ha and James (1998) note that entertainment or playfulness could be enhanced by any curiosity arousal devices (such as questions and answers). With regard to intranets, this aspect is important because in a working environment employees do not have time to waste on playing games. There are

other methods to entertain and arouse the curiosity of employees. An example of a work-related method to add playfulness to an intranet is the organising of competitions amongst employees, for example a treasure hunt (Damsgaard & Scheepers, 1999).

- *Choice*

The choice dimension refers to the availability of choice and unrestricted navigation to the user. This dimension of choice could also be seen as empowerment to employees (referring to Duane & Finnegan, 2003). Ha and James (1998:461) postulate that “when a visitor is content and feels empowered, he will spend more time at the website, exploring alternatives and absorbing materials”. It is therefore important to provide the user with options, such as choosing between text and graphics or choosing a specific language of preference.

- *Connectedness*

This dimension gives users the feeling that they are connected to the world, by providing hyperlinks on the site. Connectedness makes the user feel capable of linking to the outside world and broaden their experience. The World Wide Web applications that Ha and James (1998) make mention of is simulation of showrooms or linked content-rich pressrooms. However, with intranets connectedness could be establish by providing employees links to work-related web sites or to other organisations that affects their work, therefore “connecting” them from the organisation to the outside world.

- *Information collection*

This, according to Ha and James (1998), is primarily a need of the communicator. It is becoming important for organisations to set up databases and be more informed on their stakeholders. With more information about their audiences an organisation can tailor messages to fit their audiences’ needs. Examples of information collection on the web include visitor registration through admission requirement forms or without the user’s knowledge through cookie files. In the case of intranets information collection could happen through tracking the number of hits the intranet has per day, monitored through the IT department. The recording use-mode and the importance of research for obtaining information about employees could perhaps be mentioned here. By building questions and answers (or other types of surveys) into the intranet, communication managers could learn more about their internal stakeholders’ specific needs (therefore reaching the highest use-mode of intranets and using research to gain information about stakeholders).

- *Reciprocal communication*

This dimension of interactivity refers to its unique two-way nature. Traditional media was usually one-way with the communicator disseminating information without expecting any feedback or response. Reciprocal communication could be established through the presence of response mechanisms. The reciprocal dimension of interactivity, according to Naudé, Froneman and Atwood (2003; 2004) is closely related to two-way symmetrical communication and it is also because of this

dimension that two-way communication and interactivity could almost be used as synonyms.

According to Ha and James (1998) the specific function of the website and the nature of the organisation would influence these dimensions. Naudé (2001) adds to that by emphasising the importance of establishing strategic goals for understanding the function of the site (see section 2.6.3). Although these interactivity dimensions could be visible on intranets, they would be applied differently than on the Internet.

Naudé (2001) has conducted a qualitative study amongst South African non-profit organisations. In this study the link between interactivity and two-way symmetry are confirmed, as the study indicated that organisations with high levels of interactivity built into their websites, were more inclined to practice two-way symmetrical communication with stakeholders (Naudé, Froneman & Atwood, 2004). This leads to a new section in the study: the relation between interactivity, dialogue and two-way symmetry. This section could be concluded with the following theoretical statement:

Specific theoretical statement 4:

The following interactivity dimensions could enable two-way symmetrical communication via an intranet site:

- Playfulness;
- Choice;
- Connectedness;
- Information collection; and
- Reciprocal communication.

2.8 The capability of web-based technologies to enhance dialogue, two-way symmetrical communication and relationships with stakeholders

The use of technology does not necessarily have to estrange the organisation from its stakeholders in fact; if applied correctly it could result in more effective public relations. The answer lies in *dialogic communication* with stakeholders – a concept that could be applied theoretically to the Internet, but which could also be applied to intranets (Kent and Taylor, 1998; Esrock & Leichty, 2000). Technology could neither destroy nor build relationships, but the way in which the technology is used could greatly influence public relations (Swart & Verwey, 2003).

According to Kent and Taylor (1998:325) “public relations literature about the Web has operated under a monologic communication continuum suggesting that the public relations practitioner’s role is primarily one of information gatherer and disseminator”. Without dialogue new media is nothing more than a monologic medium or a new marketing technology. New media has changed the communication landscape, resulting in a demand of dialogue rather than monologue for achieving mutual understanding and consensus (Swart & Verwey, 2003). In order for long-term lasting and positive relationships with stakeholders some form of dialogic loop must be incorporated into web pages and other web-based technologies (Kent & Taylor,

1998; Naudé, Froneman & Atwood, 2003; Kent, Taylor & White, 2003). According to Cooley (1999) dialogic relationships exist when various stakeholders and the organisation are contributing equally and are involved in a dialogue that is based on building a relationship. Stewart (1978) describes a *relationship* as one of the foundations of dialogic communication. This aspect of building an equally beneficial relationship between stakeholders and the organisation is an essential aspect of the two-way symmetrical model of public relations. According to Steyn, Grobler and Cilliers (2005), web-based technology can be used by public relations practitioners to enhance the organisation's two-way symmetrical communication relationships.

Botan (1997) describes dialogue as a much more ethical approach than monologue. Monologue narrows the choices of stakeholders and focuses on the communicator's message, not on the audience's needs. Monologue lacks a spirit of mutual trust. Dialogue, the polar opposite of monologue, is characterised by a relationship in which both parties have genuine concern for each other.

Although dialogue seems "conceptually simple", such an approach is very difficult to put into practice and is often not practised by organisations (Botan, 1997:197). Kent and Taylor (1998:326-331) provide guidelines on how to effectively use the Internet's dialogic capability. The authors highlight five principles for applying dialogic communication to web-based technology:

- *The dialogic/feedback loop*

One of new media's most obvious advantages is that it allows direct feedback from audiences. This principle of dialogic communication allows stakeholders to communicate directly to the organisation – asking questions, making concerns known or requiring more information. More importantly, however, is the fact that a dialogic loop allows organisations to *respond* to stakeholders' questions, concerns, requirements and ideas. This principle allows true two-way symmetrical communication. Kent and Taylor (1998) also emphasise that specifically trained people should be identified to address stakeholders' concerns. It is important for "complete" dialogic loops to be incorporated into websites. The importance of responding interactively to stakeholders is emphasised, but also the *content* of the response (Kent and Taylor, 1998; Naudé, Froneman & Atwood, 2004). If qualified practitioners are employed to answer stakeholders' information needs, the intranet already obtains a more strategic function.

- *The usefulness of information*

This principle identified by Kent and Taylor (1998) is based on relevant content that answers in stakeholders' needs. Content is perhaps seen as one of the most important role players of effective intranets (Tredinnick & Tilly, 2001; Agarwal, 2001).

Intranet sites are visited because they answer in a specific need of employees. This aspect is described by Kent and Taylor (1998) as the basis of dialogic communication because stakeholders rely on organisations' web sites to offer *trustworthy and useful* information. With reference to the usefulness information, Kent

and Taylor (1998) also highlight the importance of clear structure and hierarchy. Naudé, Froneman and Atwood (2004) add that an organisation should not only promote its own interests, but should also strive to meet the information needs, interests, values and concerns of stakeholders in order to engage in two-way symmetrical communication. Ha and James (1998) stress that stakeholders can only be *involved* by the organisation by providing content useful to their needs.

Tredinnick and Tilly's (2001:21-23) "building blocks" for an intranet content management strategy is applicable to the usefulness of information principle. The authors define effective content in terms of *quality*, *reliability* and *organisation*. The organisation building block is applicable to the intuitiveness and ease of interface principle of dialogic communication. Quality content is relevant (thus meeting the needs of employees), it meets all the specifications of information legislation, it is suitable and it takes a consistent approach to handling sensitive information like employee appraisals etc. Reliable content is accurate, current, not redundant and gives attribution to sources (internally as well as externally).

The importance of useful information is also emphasised by Leonard (2005:126) when he argues that an intranet should not only contain information that is convenient to have: "Intranets should include data, information and knowledge that are easily digestible, essential for decision making and vital for daily work."

- *The generation of return visits*

It is within this principle that recent, updated content that makes the user "come back for more" plays an important role. According to Kent and Taylor (1998) sites should contain features that make them attractive for users. However, updating of information could be regarded as a one-way strategy and therefore public relations practitioners should also aim to insert forums, question and answer formats and responses from experts (such as the CEO) to generate return visits.

- *The intuitiveness/ease of interface*

In order to allow complete dialogue between stakeholders and the organisation, websites should be easy to use and understand. Kent and Taylor (1998:329) point out that "users should not have to follow seemingly random links to discover what information a site contains and where links will lead". According to Van der Walt, Brakel and Kok (2005) the *design* of an intranet is important for facilitating the sharing and re-use of knowledge. It plays an important role in negotiating collective understanding, interpretation and shared meaning and also supports co-operative work action (based on a model of Choo, Deltor & Turnbull; in van der Walt, Brakel & Kok). Other authors have also emphasised the importance of World Wide Web sites (and other web-based technologies) to facilitate relationship building, especially through applying interactivity and usability design (Kent, Taylor & White, 2003; Esrock & Leichty, 2000; Hallahan, 2001).

The organisation building block identified by Tredinnick and Tilly (2001) stresses the importance of consistent referencing, links, indexing and design. If a consistent

approach is not followed to intranet design the intranet may be difficult to use and ultimately results in employees not using the intranet. The underlying structure and logic of an intranet is also very important. Hallahan (2001) is another author emphasising the importance of usability for new media. Usability could be defined as "how well the intended users can interact with the technology to carry out the assigned activity" (Hallahan, 2001:224). Content and design simplicity are two preconditions for effective websites (Hallahan, 2001). The author also highlights search features and online help facilities as tools which make it easier for users to find information and use the medium.

- *The rule of conservation of visitors*

Kent and Taylor (1998) point out that public relations practitioners must take cognisance of the fact that links should not lead visitors to other sites and lead them astray. Intranets cannot lead to other intranets (a point highlighted by Agarwal, 2001) but it could lead to external links and to other sites on the intranet. Therefore it is important that it must always be easy for users to find their way back if they clicked on a hyperlink. A company's intranet is often its only online source to company information (Agarwal, 2001), and therefore it is critical that an intranet must be easy to navigate.

It becomes evident that web-based technology's unique interactive nature has the potential to establish two-way symmetrical communication and dialogue with strategic publics (stakeholders) like employees if dialogic principles are purposefully applied to the design and content of the medium. This leads to the final theoretical statement in this chapter:

Specific theoretical statement 5:

The five principles of creating dialogue with stakeholders through the intranet (focusing particularly on content that is useful to employees and a user-friendly intranet), should be purposefully applied to an intranet in order to establish two-way symmetrical communication with stakeholders. A two-way symmetrical intranet therefore has the following five principles visible on its site:

- The dialogic/feedback loop;
- The usefulness of information;
- The generation of return visits;
- The intuitiveness/ease of interface; and
- The rule of conservation of visitors.

2.9 Summary of literature

The intranet's potential to enhance internal communication is a well-known attribute of this new technology. To fully understand how an intranet could enhance internal communication one must first understand its functions, use-modes, characteristics, developmental phases and current management styles. However, these issues (as examined in this study), focused primarily on a technological view of intranets. This leads to the first theoretical statement, namely that a more integrated socio-technical

approach is necessary for intranets to be truly effective and more two-way symmetrical.

One particular characteristic of new media including intranets is its interactive nature. When assessing the different use-modes of intranets it seems that interactivity only becomes noticeable in the third use-mode. The first use-mode is characterised by the provision of information (relating to the public information model of public relations). Whereas the second use-mode (transacting) refers to the intranet being a unitary interface to which other information systems could be applied, thus applying functional strategy to intranets (Steyn, Grobler & Cilliers, 2005), where a service of the IT department is provided to the organisation and various users (Watcher & Gupta, 1997). The second theoretical statement determined that in order for an intranet to be truly interactive it should move beyond the publishing and transacting use-modes of intranets.

The intranet is a communication tool with vast benefits for the organisation. However, for the medium to reach its optimal potential it should be applied as a *strategic communication tool* driven by communication managers equipped with the know-how to apply two-way symmetrical principles to the intranet. The IT department must only play a "functional" role by providing the communications department with excellent interactive applications in order to create dialogue with employees. Thus, the third theoretical statement stated that the intranet must be managed by the communication department in order to be two-way symmetrical in nature. The answer is simply that for the intranet to be a strategic tool, communication managers must apply two-way symmetrical principles to the intranet.

Many authors have emphasised the relation between interactivity, dialogue and two-way symmetry. Therefore, if the intranet contributes to the dimensions of interactivity (Ha & James, 1998) it is already closer in its objective to achieve two-way symmetry (fourth theoretical statement). Kent and Taylor (1998) also identified five direct principles to apply dialogue/two-way symmetry to web-based technologies. If these principles are purposefully applied to the content and design of the intranet, two-way symmetrical communication would be more likely to be achieved through an intranet (fifth theoretical statement).

In most of the articles reviewed it seemed as if the Internet and intranets were not ultimately successful in reaching a balanced, give-and-take relationship with stakeholders. However, there is enough evidence in literature that proves new media's potential to create mutual beneficial relationships with stakeholders, due to its interactive/dialogic capabilities.

In the following chapter the methodology that was used to describe the Lonmin intranet's contribution to two-way symmetrical communication, will be fully explained, focussing on the research approach that was followed in this study and the specific research design.

Chapter 3: Research methodology

3.1 Introduction to social research

Social science involves the study of people – their beliefs, behaviour, interaction, and institutions. In the past social science has been criticised as not being “science” in the true sense of the word (Priest, 1996). Stemming from strong positivist philosophy (the possibility and desirability to develop a “science” of society) early social scientists based their study of society on objective observations, free from opinion, prejudice and outside influence. However, this version of the scientific model of social science was later questioned, as scholars began to doubt the possibility that social abstractions such as individual human thought, attitudes, beliefs and values could be portrayed completely objectively, without being influenced by the researcher’s own interpretation (Priest, 1996). These questions lead social researchers to more interpretative research methods.

When doing social research, the researcher could either follow a quantitative or qualitative research approach. Quantitative research is characterised by statistics and numbers, measurement of objective facts and a researcher who stands independent from the context of the study. Quantitative research methods are intrinsically linked with a positivistic view to social research (Neuman, 1997).

As opposed to quantitative research, qualitative research is linked with an interpretative view of social science. Qualitative research explores and assesses things that cannot easily be summarised numerically. This approach relies on the interpretation and analysis of what people do and say. Context and subtle themes are of importance during qualitative research (Priest, 1996).

In modern social science qualitative and quantitative research approaches are equally valued and used – both have their shortcomings and unique advantages. Whether a positivist or an interpretative researcher, using quantitative or qualitative approaches, the same principles must be followed. According to Priest (1996:5) “good science uses theory well, gathers evidence systematically, and contributes to the accumulation of knowledge”. These should be universal guidelines for social research, regardless of a positivistic or interpretative approach to social science.

The purpose of this chapter is to give a more comprehensive explanation of the research methodology that was used during this study, as it was briefly mentioned in chapter 1. The study is based on a qualitative research approach which would be further described in the following section. The two research methods as well as the research design of the two selected methods and the finer details of the sampling process would also be explained in this chapter.

3.2 Qualitative research: characteristics and motivation

The characteristics of a qualitative research approach, according to Neuman (1997), focus on context and cultural meaning. The emphasis is on interactive processes and authenticity. The researcher is much more involved in the research process, more emphasis is put on thematic analysis and there are less cases or subjects present than in the case of quantitative research. This type of research is ideally conducted within natural settings (Naudé, 2001).

Naudé (2001) explains that researchers have suggested a qualitative approach to new media studies, because the Internet and other related new technology remains a relative unexplored field of study.

This study is based on a qualitative research approach, because the focus is more on the quality of information than the quantity. There were fewer respondents present in the samples, and instead of identifying and prescribing trends by processing a large amount of data, the researcher focussed on the context and social setting of the respondents and the environment in which they operated. This study focussed on the *perceptions* of middle management of their corporate intranet, thus the objective was to describe and explore abstractions like thoughts, ideas and attitudes – phenomena best described by qualitative research. Because the study also focussed on an integrated socio-technical approach to intranets, a qualitative research approach was more suitable to highlight and emphasise the “human” aspect of intranets.

3.3 Research methods

In this qualitative study two research methods are employed, namely:

- Qualitative content analysis and
- Interviews.

3.3.1 Qualitative content analysis

Content analysis is a technique used for examining information or content in written or symbolic material (Neuman, 1997:31). Neuman (1997) indicates that content analyses are used for exploratory and explanatory research, but is most often used for *descriptive* research. According to Williams, Rice and Rogers (1988) content could either be analysed quantitatively: as frequencies or percentages of one category compared to another or to determine the reliability coding, or it could be analysed qualitatively where an *understanding* of the use and form of various content is developed.

A qualitative content analysis was used in this study, as the aim was to develop an understanding of the content on the Lonmin intranet. The main objective of the content analysis was to explore the Lonmin intranet as an internal communication medium, and

to determine to what extent it related with the various intranet use-modes and the identified principles of interactivity and two-way symmetry. According to Du Plooy (2001:49) replication and accuracy are not scientific criteria when your main objective is to explore, but rather to obtain an *understanding of an unknown area*.

Therefore the qualitative content analysis is applied to this study as a method to answer the second research question: How are the basic principles of two-way symmetrical communication applied to the Lonmin intranet?

3.3.2 Semi-structured interviews

Naudé (2001:104) explains that in-depth or intensive interviews are used in nearly all qualitative research projects. In this study semi-structured interviews were used as main method to describe middle management's perceptions of the Lonmin intranet. Semi-structured interviews differ from unstructured interviews in the sense that an interview schedule is present. Therefore standardised questions are set before the start of the interview. However, the researcher may deviate from the standard interview questions and does not necessarily have to ask all the questions on the interview schedule (Naudé, 2001:105; Du Plooy, 2001:176). According to Neuman (1997) interviews are an ideal method to use when the researcher wants to understand the social context and environment of the respondent. In this study, interviews seemed to be the ideal research method to use in order to obtain more insight from employees on the context and social perceptions they held with regard to the intranet.

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as primary research method for this study, because this method enables the researcher to actively take part in the natural environment of the respondents. It was also the method that best suited the research objectives of the study. The objective of the semi-structured interviews was to describe middle management's perceptions of the intranet in terms of internal communication, in an attempt to answer the third and to some extent the fourth research question.

A qualitative research design is based on inductive reasoning; therefore the researcher begins with detailed observations of the world and move toward more abstract generalisations and ideas (Neuman, 1997:46). As Du Plooy (2001) indicates, if questioning is used in inductive reasoning, one would base the questions on assumptions and end with descriptions (summaries and interpretations) of the responses received. In this study the questions that were asked to middle management were based on the theoretical assumptions that were made in chapter 2. The responses of middle management were described, interpreted and concluded according to these theoretical statements.

3.3.3 Unstructured interviews

Du Plooy (2002) defines an unstructured interview as an interview where the interviewer creates an atmosphere of trust and lets the respondent talk freely about the subject. It allows the interviewer to discover the respondent's ideas, views, suggestions and queries. These types of interviews usually do not have stipulated interview schedules. The main objective of such an interview is to obtain depth or insight into the topic being investigated. In this study an unstructured interview was scheduled with the IT web master in order to obtain insight on the history and management of the Lonmin intranet.

A combination of two data collection methods was used. This method of triangulation (to make use of more than one research method), as highlighted by Du Plooy (2001) added to the reliability and validity of the analyses and findings during the study.

3.4 Research design

Du Plooy (2001:34) argues that when the researcher uses a qualitative research approach "themes and categories could be developed as methods to explore and describe meanings communicated in particular contexts". With the content analysis, certain categories were identified through the literature. These categories served as a guideline to describe the content of the intranet in terms of intranet use-modes, interactivity and two-way symmetry. In the case of the semi-structured interviews, the central themes that were highlighted by respondents were examined and described by the researcher, according to the theoretical findings of chapter 2.

3.4.1 Methodological structure

In order to obtain a better understanding of the research design and how it links with the research questions, the theoretical statements and the research methods, a table was developed to explain these links. The theoretical statements are listed again as quick reference for the reader, followed by a schematic table of the link between the research questions, theoretical statements and research methods.

Theoretical statement 1

The literature examined in this section emphasised that the technological focus on intranets tends to be too strong and that a more integrated socio-technical approach to intranets is necessary. The intranet is often under-utilised by employees, due to a strong focus on its technical functions, rather than its communication role. Many interactive functions on the intranet remain unused due to a lack of understanding thereof and discrepancies often occur between the content provided on the intranet and the actual uses thereof. However, it is also important to note that interactivity increases as the intranet evolves and becomes more utilised by employees.

It could be argued that in order for an intranet to be more interactive and establish two-way symmetrical communication in the organisation, management must put emphasis on its *communication or social impact*. A first step towards doing so is to provide employees with training in order for them to optimally use interactive functions on the intranet.

Theoretical statement 2

In order for an intranet to achieve two-way symmetrical communication, it must move beyond the publishing use mode of intranets, and should aim to achieve more interactive use-modes. The publishing use-mode correlates with the public information model to public relations, and is therefore not two-way or symmetrical in nature. The transacting use-mode offers limited interactivity, because it is characterised only by technological connectivity (therefore its linkage to other information systems). However, if an intranet is operating in the interacting, searching and recording use-modes, it becomes truly interactive and therefore more symmetrical in nature. An effective intranet shows characteristics of two-way symmetrical communication and a two-way symmetrical intranet is characterised by organisational connectivity.

Theoretical statement 3

It becomes evident in literature that new technology has enabled communication managers to establish "virtual relationships" with stakeholders. These relationships should be balanced, thus it should be two-way in nature. Two-way symmetrical and asymmetrical patterns of communication tend to be the most strategic communication approaches because it is based on research.

In South African public relations, communication managers have not frequently applied new technology as a relationship building tool with stakeholders. However, when they used it to manage relationships it was more often at *tactical level* (based on one-way approaches and associated with the technician role of public relations), rather than *strategic level*. Two strategic approaches could be applied to web-based technology:

- ***Functional strategy***

This refers to the Information Technology's department role to the intranet. Functional strategy refers to the management of the *technology* itself. It focuses on the IT department's ability to establish and maintain interactive applications on the intranet and to provide a service to users (see the support services model). It is also referred to as a tactical approach to new technology and is one-way in nature.

- *Operational strategy*

Operational strategy is two-way in nature, as it is based on research and feedback. It is within this strategic leg of web-based technology where the technology is used to establish and maintain mutual beneficial relationships with stakeholders, and where there is a balance in power between the organisation and its different stakeholders. *In order for an intranet to be two-way symmetrical in nature excellent communication managers must follow an operational strategy to intranet management.*

Theoretical statement 4

The following interactivity dimensions could enable two-way symmetrical communication via an intranet site:

- Playfulness;
- Choice;
- Connectedness;
- Information collection; and
- Reciprocal communication.

Theoretical statement 5

The five principles of creating dialogue with stakeholders through the intranet (focusing particularly on content that is useful to employees and a user-friendly intranet), should be purposefully applied to an intranet in order to establish two-way symmetrical communication with stakeholders. A two-way symmetrical intranet therefore has the following five principles visible on its site:

- The dialogic/feedback loop;
- The usefulness of information;
- The generation of return visits;
- The intuitiveness/ease of interface; and
- The rule of conservation of visitors.

Below follows a schematic table of the link between the research questions, theoretical statements and research methods.

Table 3.4.1: Link between research questions, theoretical statements and research methods.

Research question	Theoretical statement	Research method	Content categories and interview questions applicable to research questions	Chapter
Research question 1 How can an intranet establish two-way symmetrical communication?	<i>Theoretical statement 1</i> <i>Theoretical statement 2</i> <i>Theoretical statement 3</i> <i>Theoretical statement 4</i> <i>Theoretical statement 5</i>	Literature study	This question was theoretical, thus none of the empirical elements are applicable to this question.	Chapter 2
Research question 2 How are the basic principles of two-way symmetrical communication applied on the Lonmin intranet?	<i>Theoretical statement 2</i> <i>Theoretical statement 4</i> <i>Theoretical statement 5</i>	Content analysis	Content analysis categories: <i>Intranet use-modes:</i> ▪ Publishing use-mode ▪ Transacting use-mode ▪ Interactive use-mode ▪ Searching use-mode ▪ Recording use-mode <i>Interactivity dimensions:</i> ▪ Playfulness ▪ Choice ▪ Connectedness ▪ Information collection ▪ Reciprocal communication <i>Two-way symmetrical communication principles:</i> ▪ The dialogic/feedback loop ▪ The usefulness of information ▪ The generation of return visits	Chapter 4

			▪ The intuitiveness/ease of interface ▪ The rule of conservation of visitors	
Research question 3 How does middle management perceive and use the Lonmin intranet with respect to two-way symmetrical communication?	<i>Theoretical statement 1</i> <i>Theoretical statement 3</i>	Unstructured interview with web master in order to understand the context and management of the intranet before the rest of the empirical findings were collected	No formal interview schedule was developed. The setting was that of a normal open discussion, with the purpose to understand more of the context of the Lonmin intranet.	Chapter 4
	<i>Theoretical statement 1</i> <i>Theoretical statement 2</i> <i>Theoretical statement 4</i> <i>Theoretical statement 5</i>	Semi-structured interviews with middle management	Interview questions of <i>interview schedule 3.4.3.1</i> : 1 – 14	Chapter 4
	<i>Theoretical statement 1</i> <i>Theoretical statement 3</i>	Telephonic interview with internal communication manager	Interview questions of <i>interview schedule 3.4.3.2</i> : 1 – 12	Chapter 4
Research question 4 How can the Lonmin intranet be improved to enhance two-way symmetrical communication?	<i>Theoretical statement 3</i>	Content analysis, interviews and literature findings were combined with the researcher's own conclusions in order to make recommendations	Interview questions: 14	Chapter 5

Source: chapter 1 and chapter 2.

3.4.2 Content analysis

The content analysis qualitatively measured the use-mode functioning of the Lonmin intranet, the dimensions of interactivity that was present on the intranet and the two-way symmetrical principles that was visible on the intranet by investigating the content. Categories were identified to describe how these principles/aspects were applied to the intranet. Listed below is a summary of the various categories and what each category entailed:

Intranet use-modes

- *Publishing use-mode*: the intranet was only used to publish static documents.
- *Transacting use-mode*: the intranet had applications on it that linked with other Information Technology systems and that ran from a single point via the intranet.
- *Interacting use-mode*: the intranet had interactive applications published on it that could create dialogue between departments.
- *Searching use-mode*: the intranet had the capability to search for information (e.g. via a search engine).
- *Recording use-mode*: the intranet had the capability to collect, record and organise organisational information (e.g. via frequently asked questions).

Dimensions of interactivity

- *Playfulness*: the intranet showed examples of applications that could be enjoyable to the user (e.g. an organisational treasure hunt).
- *Choice*: the intranet provides the user with unrestricted navigation and a wide variety of content to choose from (e.g. choice between languages).
- *Connectedness*: the intranet gives users a feeling that they are connected to the world (e.g. via hyperlinks).
- *Information collection*: the intranet has built-in devices or applications that collect information from users (e.g. questionnaires, counting the number of "hits" the intranet has per day).
- *Reciprocal communication*: the intranet has the ability to create a two-way conversation with and between employees (e.g. discussion boards, online chat facilities). The intranet also has reactive communication devices such as e-mail links and contact numbers.

Two-way symmetric / dialogical principles

- *Dialogic/feedback loop*: the intranet has dialogue enabling tools (as specified above) published on it and a trained public relations person to answer employees' questions.
- *Usefulness of information*: the content on the intranet is relevant, accurate, current and useful and answers in employees' information needs.
- *Generation of return visits*: the intranet provides content to users that is recent, updated and new and makes the user come back to read more.

- *Intuitiveness/ease of interface:* the intranet must be visually appealing and must be user-friendly, easy to use and navigate and should be organised.
- *Conservation of visitors:* the intranet must not lead users astray by confusing them with internal or hyperlinks.

Table 3.4.2: Content analysis categories.

Intranet use-modes	▪ Publishing use-mode
	▪ Transacting use-mode
	▪ Interacting use-mode
	▪ Searching use-mode
	▪ Recording use-mode
Dimensions of interactivity	▪ Playfulness
	▪ Choice
	▪ Connectedness
	▪ Information collection
	▪ Reciprocal communication
Two-way symmetric/dialogic principles in web-based technology	▪ Dialogic/feedback loop
	▪ Usefulness of information
	▪ Generation of return visits
	▪ The intuitiveness/ease of interface
	▪ Conservation of visitors

Source: Damsgaard and Scheepers (1999), Kent and Taylor (1998), Naudé (2001).

3.4.3 Interviews

The interviews were aimed at exploring middle management's perceptions of the intranet in order to describe whether or not it contributed to two-way symmetrical communication principles.

In order to provide context to the study an unstructured interview was scheduled with the IT web master. This discussion assisted in giving insight on the way the intranet was managed at that time, and what the IT department's role was in the intranet management process. No formal interview schedule was used during this interview, as it was a broad discussion to gain insight on the history and management of the intranet at the time the study was conducted. This interview was not seen as part of the formal research design, but served as a guideline to develop the research design and get a general overview of the origin and management of the intranet.

As a central data collection method, semi-structured interviews were held with ten middle management respondents. The questions that were asked to respondents consisted mainly of open-ended questions.

To gain more insight on the communication side of the Lonmin intranet, an interview was scheduled with the internal communication manager. This interview was conducted telephonically for practical reasons. Although the interview was telephonic, it was still qualitative in nature and a specific time and date was scheduled which suited the respondent to complete the interview uninterruptedly.

The following two sections give an outline of the interview schedules for the semi-structured interviews with ten middle management employees and the qualitative telephonic interview with the internal communication manager.

3.4.3.1 Semi-structured interviews with middle management

The table below lists the questions that were asked to middle management:

Table 3.4.3.1: Semi-structured interview schedule with middle management.

- | |
|--|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. What is your general perception of an intranet?2. What is your general perception of the Lonmin intranet?3. Do you use the intranet? If not, explain why.4. How often do you use the Lonmin intranet?5. What is the main reason that you use the intranet for?6. In your opinion, what is the most important function of the Lonmin intranet to the organisation?7. What applications do you find most useful on the intranet?8. Can you name examples of how these applications have made your daily job easier or improved communication with other departments?9. What frustrates or annoys you about the current intranet?10. What is your view of the visual design of the intranet?11. What is your opinion of the content on the Lonmin intranet?12. What is your view of the usability and user-friendliness of the Lonmin intranet?13. Do you think the intranet reaches its full potential in the organisation?14. What recommendations would you like to add to improve on the effectiveness of the current intranet? |
|--|

Source: Based on literature study findings.

3.4.3.2 Semi-structured telephonic interview

The table below lists the questions that were asked to the internal communication manager.

Table 3.4.3.2: Semi-structured telephonic interview schedule.

1. What is your view of the current Lonmin intranet in terms of internal communication?
2. To what extent do you feel the current intranet plays a role in improving internal communication? Why?
3. Do you think the current flow of messages is primarily one-way, or do you think the intranet allows a level of two-way communication?
4. If not, how can two-way message flow be encouraged or improved via the intranet?
5. Do you think the current intranet plays a role in establishing collaboration between departments?
6. If not, how can the intranet be managed to improve interdepartmental collaboration?
7. From an internal communications perspective, what frustrates or bothers you about the current intranet? What, as internal communication manager, is your biggest area of concern?
8. What is your perception of the way the intranet is currently managed?
9. How do you describe the ideal management approach to the intranet, in order to enhance internal communication at Lonmin in future?
10. Does the communications department have a defined communication strategy?
11. If so, how does the intranet fit into the communications strategy?
12. How will the intranet be applied to establish better relationships with employees?
13. What general recommendations could you add to improve the Lonmin intranet?

Source: Based on literature study findings.

3.5 Sampling

Qualitative research is characterised by much smaller samples than quantitative research, because the main focus is on the *quality* of the information obtained by the researcher, who actively takes part in the research process (Neuman, 1997).

In this study ten middle management employees of Lonmin Platinum Mine were interviewed. The sample consisted of middle management employees representing the most important disciplines and departments of Lonmin. The selected departments included Mining, Metallurgy, Environment, Community, Admin and Finance, Six Sigma, Training, Information Technology, Human Resources and Safety. These ten

departments were identified according to Lonmin's business structure. There were also links to each of the ten divisions on the main menu bar of the intranet.

According to a Stakeholder Perception Survey conducted for Lonmin Platinum Mine by the North-West University, only 4% of the total number of employees falls in the middle management category (Naudé, Fourie, Van Heerden, Le Roux & Venter, 2004). Because of the qualitative nature of the research design and because middle management makes up a very small percentage of the total 25 000 employees working at Lonmin, it was therefore representative to conduct the interviews with only ten respondents.

Respondents were selected from the ten identified divisions, and the main selection criteria for the respondents were to be on middle management level. A representative respondent from each of the ten identified divisions was selected by means of a purposeful sample, bearing in mind practicality and feasibility of conducting the interviews. The researcher knew the respondents and therefore chose respondents that were information rich and that would be co-operative and talkative during the interviews. Availability of respondents also played a role when selecting the sample.

The internal communication manager and IT web master were selected, because of their positions and the operational roles they played within the management of the intranet at that time.

3.6 Sample motivation

Only 2 000 employees have access to the Lonmin intranet. In an organisation with 25 000 employees the impact of the intranet to establish two-way symmetrical communication between all employees would therefore be minimal. However, as literature has indicated, the intranet could have significant impact on internal communication, especially two-way symmetrical internal communication and therefore it could play an integral part in enhancing two-way symmetrical communication with and between the 2 000 employees who have access to computers.

These 2 000 employees could be broadly subdivided in top management, middle management and lower management (e.g. office administrators and shift bosses). Among these three segments, middle management was identified as the target research population because out of the three segments they tend to be more office-based and therefore reap maximum benefits from the intranet. They are also the link between top management and lower management. Top management performs at a high strategic level, lower management perform at a tactical level, whereas middle management is performing at an operational level.

Members of top management are also frequently out of the office to travel between the widely dispersed organisation, and they were therefore difficult to get hold of for interviews. Secondly, it could be assumed that they use the intranet less frequently due to their extensive travelling obligations and busy schedules.

Lower management, although referred to as “management”, operates at a technical or tactical level. Although the intranet could have a significant impact on their daily functioning as well, their responses would be less management-driven and therefore they were also eliminated as a target population for the study.

3.7 Data collection procedures

3.7.1 Content analysis

The content of the Lonmin intranet was analysed by using the categories that were identified in chapter 2 and explained in section 3.4.2. By actively investigating and studying the content on the intranet the researcher noted down the presence and absence of items that were applicable to the categories identified. While being online, with the intranet open on the computer screen, the researcher described the content qualitatively on a note pad, guided by the different categories. This raw data collected from the content analysis were documented separately from the interviews, but would be described together with the interviews in chapter 4.

3.7.2 Semi-structured interviews

The researcher has randomly selected ten middle management employees from various representative divisions of the organisation (as described in section 5). These respondents were contacted telephonically to schedule an interview time in a quiet, uninterrupted environment.

While conducting the interviews the researcher took notes of what the respondents said and recorded the interviews with a tape recorder. Permission was asked before the interviews were recorded and none of the respondents had a problem with the fact that the interviews were being recorded. After the data was collected it was documented separately per respondent. These separate results were then combined and the interpretations of the results are described in chapter 4.

3.8 Factors influencing the validity of the research

The researcher was actively involved in the environment where this study was conducted, as the study was preceded by a post-graduate internship where smaller research studies were conducted on the mine's internal newsletter and the feasibility of broadcasting internal news bulletins. Therefore, the researcher had a better

understanding of the context, corporate culture and other factors that might have influenced the responses of middle management, than just being an outsider that collected information.

Although this gave the researcher a better understanding of the mining context and communication climate in the organisation, one could also argue that the fact that the researcher was familiar to some of the respondents might have influenced their objectivity with sharing information during the interviews.

Another aspect to make mention of is the fact that the respondents that were interviewed were predominantly white males. Although four women and one African respondent were interviewed, the majority of the respondents were white males. According to an Employee Survey conducted by the North-West University, however, results indicated that Lonmin was still predominantly managed by white males and therefore the sample (although not culturally diverse) could not be criticised for this matter.

3.9 Conclusion

This study is based on a qualitative research design, as it was the research approach that best suited the research questions and objectives that was identified in the study. In the literature, specific theoretical statements were made and these statements guided the researcher to develop content categories for the content analysis (first research method) and interview schedules for the semi-structured interviews (second research method). The combination of two data collection methods (triangulation) increased the validity of the research results.

The categories that were identified for the content analysis was based on intranet use-modes, interactivity dimensions and two-way symmetrical principles. The interview schedules were based on more general questions. The objective was therefore to establish whether middle management's perceptions were inline with two-way symmetric principles and theory (as identified and described in chapter 2), by investigating their perception of the intranet in terms two-way symmetrical communication.

The following chapter (chapter 4) will describe and explore the results of the content analysis and semi-structured interviews.

Chapter 4: Research findings

4.1 Introduction

"The information age is not just about technology: it is about communication. Managers need to realise what the capabilities of these new mediums are, because of the impact of their characteristics on the communication process."

– Steyn, Grobler and Cilliers (2005:21)

This chapter contains a description of all the findings that were made during the conduction of the Lonmin intranet study. It explores and describes the views of middle management, the internal communication manager, the IT web master as well as the results of the qualitative content analysis.

In this chapter a deductive reasoning approach is followed, by first describing respondents' general view of the Lonmin intranet. It is followed in the next section by a critical aspect of this study: a management perspective of the Lonmin intranet. The third section describes Lonmin's internal communication and its relation with the intranet. Finally, the chapter moves into more specific results by focussing on the usage patterns of the intranet and factors relating to interactivity and two-way symmetry. The chapter is concluded with a general summary of the results obtained through the interviews and qualitative content analysis.

4.2 General overview

4.2.1 Middle management's general views of the Lonmin intranet

All respondents felt that an intranet in general could make a valuable contribution towards the organisation. The majority of respondents emphasised the importance of the intranet as being a communication tool, that it could have an extremely positive impact on the organisation and that it could enhance internal communication. Some respondents highlighted the importance of the intranet only in terms of it being an effective tool to share information via a single interface, whereas others described the intranet as an effective collaboration tool. Two respondents made it clear that an intranet is only effective, "if it works properly", therefore emphasising that an intranet is "in principle" a wonderful medium, but only if it works and answers in employees' needs. It is also interesting to note that some respondents expressed their general view of an intranet in terms of their *specific needs* for an intranet: "I think an intranet should be easy to access, be focused on specific business areas, must contain relevant content for the user and should add value to the company. One must not have to search for information, it must be of such a nature that you can find it easily and automatically." Similarly, another respondent's need was expressed as follows: "It should be a communication tool with the most recent information and should be updated regularly."

When the respondents were asked to express their view of the Lonmin intranet, however, it seemed as if Lonmin's intranet did not match their picture of an ideal intranet. Some respondents noticed that the intranet got off to a very good start, and one respondent said: "It started with a bang." However, they tended to highlight that the novelty of the medium has worn off and that the challenge was now to make intranet usage in Lonmin sustainable. It was clear that almost all the respondents believed that the intranet was not yet as effective as it should be. Some respondents believed that it is "far from effective", whereas others thought that it was working "moderately, but that there is still plenty of room for improvement."

Although respondents believed that the intranet was not as effective as it should be, the majority of the respondents seemed to use the intranet relatively frequent. Half of the respondents used the intranet on a daily basis. The remaining half of the respondents used the intranet ranging from "twice a week", to less frequent or almost never. Although two of the respondents mentioned that they really did not make much use of the intranet, both of them indicated that they would have a quick look at it every two weeks, just to view the latest news. The IT manager and Six Sigma manager both remarked that the intranet was used more frequently than the organisation tended to think. The respondent from Six Sigma noted: "To my surprise I see much more employees using the intranet than I have expected. The intranet is becoming a constant source of information and news. Employees have a high need for that at the moment, specifically with the current changes and uncertainty in the organisation." The IT manager also referred to an incident where IT had a system shutdown on a Sunday. The respondent immediately realised the importance of getting the intranet back online before the start of the week, because many employees have come to rely on the intranet as a source of information. However, the metallurgical manager seemed to believe just the opposite: "The employees in my division are not using the intranet. I think the organisation will be shocked if a survey was conducted to indicate how many employees are actually using the intranet."

Generally, it seemed as if employees all believed in the *potential* of the intranet, but that the Lonmin intranet was not matching respondents' ideal picture of what an intranet could do for the organisation when this study was conducted.

4.2.2 The Lonmin intranet: reaching its full potential?

When asked to share their views on the success of the Lonmin intranet, not a single respondent felt that the intranet was reaching its full potential in the organisation. The Six Sigma manager, however, remarked that one must take into account that the intranet is a new concept in the organisation and that it obviously stood before some challenges. This thought was confirmed by the IT manager when she mentioned: "The intranet is a new tool in the organisation and employees have not adopted a culture of using the intranet yet." On a positive note the manager at Six Sigma added: "At least it is a 1 000% improvement on a year ago when Lonmin had no intranet at all."

Respondents raised many reasons for the intranet being under-utilised and not yet reaching its full potential. The main reasons for this would be investigated in the following sections, by looking at:

- The management perspective of the Lonmin intranet;
- Lonmin's internal communication and its relation to the intranet; and
- The intranet in terms of usage patterns, interactivity and two-way symmetrical communication principles.

4.3 The Lonmin intranet: a management perspective

Chapter 2 highlighted the critical importance of strategically managing the intranet from a two-way symmetrical perspective (Steyn, Grobler & Cilliers, 2005). In order to determine which approach was followed in managing the intranet, the views of the intranet web master (who took ownership of the intranet at the time when the study was conducted) and the internal communication manager, as well as the views of the ten middle management respondents, will now be described.

4.3.1 Intranet ownership and encouragement

It was interesting to note that the vast majority of respondents blamed intranet ownership as one of the main reasons why their intranet seemed to be under-utilised and not reaching its full potential. According to many respondents the ownership of the intranet cannot lie with one department only, and Lonmin managers should encourage intranet usage in their departments by encouraging employees to use the intranet more frequently.

One respondent remarked that if employees were more involved in the intranet process they would automatically take ownership of the intranet themselves. According to the manager at Six Sigma the intranet needs more input from business's side. It is important for management to give input on the intranet's business structure and involve employees in their decisions: "An important aspect of the intranet should be ownership; currently there are not enough employees who take ownership of the intranet." The respondent believed that it is every employee's responsibility to take ownership of the intranet, driven by management who should encourage them to take part in the development process of the intranet: "Every employee must have the confidence to take part in the intranet development process and contribute to its content." Another employee added that the ownership of the intranet could not lie solely with the IT department, and that every employee must be responsible for contributing to the intranet.

The environmental manager suggested that intranet use be encouraged by making it part of management's daily jobs. According to this respondent someone must be appointed to ensure that the intranet is regularly updated and contains relevant content that suits everyone's needs: "There must be a responsible person in each

working area that trains employees how to use the intranet and encourage them to use it more often. This task must be written into the person's job description and should be part of his daily work".

The issue of ownership and intranet encouragement clearly indicated a need among respondents for a more involved, "visible" management approach to the intranet. Their responses indicated that first of all, there was no one who took full accountability of the intranet and encourage intranet usage; and secondly that employees did not take ownership of their specific department's intranet sites, because the intranet lacked a consistent management approach.

4.3.2 Functional vs. operational strategy

Although it became clear in middle management's responses that the intranet lacked a consistent management approach, only one respondent highlighted the important role that the communication department should play in the intranet management process: "IT has the technical proficiency and we are their customers. The general ownership of the intranet should lie with the communications department, however. They are qualified, specialised people and must take full ownership of how the intranet looks, the content on the intranet and how it is structured."

She also emphasised that the accountability for managing the intranet must not be shared. IT must only provide assistance in the technical/functional aspect of the intranet. The IT manager also briefly mentioned that the communications department should play a role in the management of the intranet, but she did not feel that they should take full ownership of the intranet. She rather thought that the IT department and the communication department must share accountability for managing the intranet. Her view reflected a more IT-driven intranet management approach.

The majority of respondents seemed to realise the importance and absolute necessity of a "different" management approach to the intranet. However, it seemed as if the respondents commenting on the communication department to take accountability of managing the intranet were in the minority. These respondents did, however, emphasise a core part of the study: the fact that the communication department should play an integral part in the effective management of the intranet.

The responses which the intranet web master and the internal communication manager made with regard to this issue, provided more insight on the relationship between the IT department and communication department in terms of the way the Lonmin intranet was managed. The internal communication manager highlighted a very interesting and important factor about the intranet, namely that she believed that: "The intranet is seen as an IT thing as opposed to a communication tool." This remark highlights a fundamental aspect of this study.

In the view of this respondent the intranet was difficult to operate and she experienced the intranet as a complex “layered” system, implying that the technological focus of the Lonmin intranet was too strong.

The intranet web master confirmed that ownership of the intranet did lie within the IT department. The web master took full ownership of “managing” the intranet, although she was not at a strategic management level. She explained many of the interactive applications on the intranet, focussing on its technical functionality rather than its communication impact on the organisation.

It became evident that a functional strategic approach was followed to the Lonmin intranet (Steyn, Grobler & Cilliers, 2005), where the technology itself weighed more than its actual communication role (operational strategy). This was identified as a crucial shortcoming with regard to two-way symmetrical communication.

4.3.3 The intranet and communication strategy

Although the internal communication manager realised the emerging concerns regarding the intranet and completely believed in an intranet as internal communication medium, it also became evident that the intranet was not enjoying first priority with regard to the communication strategy. She admitted that there were other far more important communication issues to solve within the company before the intranet could get its rightful attention. She singled out the corporate culture of the company as a hurdle to intranet success and emphasised that the culture of the organisation was not encouraging two-way symmetrical communication.

Her outlook confirmed the remarks made by other respondents. Many respondents seemed to distrust the intranet as a medium. They seemed to be scared that the intranet would replace the last bit of interpersonal communication in the company. Many felt that departments were silo-driven and that the general corporate culture of the organisation needed to change before true two-way symmetrical communication would be achieved through the intranet. One employee remarked that: “True two-way communication would require a change in the corporate culture of the organisation and that would definitely not happen overnight.”

It is very important to note that the intranet is not a “wonder cure” to heal communication deficiencies and poor relationships with employees. If two-way symmetrical communication patterns and principles are absent in the organisation, the intranet should not be seen as the medium to create that. It should rather be seen as a medium to build and improve two-way symmetry in the organisation. Hence, the communication manager’s remark that there are other vital issues to solve within the organisation before the intranet would become part of the communication department’s strategy.

However, the accountability for the intranet was lying with the IT department and the communication manager admitted that the intranet did not form part of the

communication strategy when the data was collected. Therefore, it was not managed from a two-way symmetrical perspective. It was also pointed out in chapter 1 that the communication department had been in existence for only five months when the study was conducted. Therefore (as highlighted by the internal communication manager and many other middle management respondents) there was indeed more serious communication issues to solve, such as changing Lonmin's corporate culture and improving face-to-face communication. Nevertheless, the intranet's assisting role in establishing two-way symmetrical communication should not be neglected.

4.3.4 Intranet training

An important issue raised by almost all the managers interviewed, was the issue of intranet training: "I think the organisation overestimates employees' ability to work with the intranet. I am not that computer literate myself. I think one reason for the under-utilisation of the applications on the intranet is because there is a lot of employees who do not know *how* to use them."

The view of the above respondent was echoed by many other respondents. When one respondent was asked why he does not use some of the applications, his answer was: "You must remember that we were not trained by anyone to use the applications or what they have to offer. I had to figure out how to use the functions myself."

The training manager indicated that she conducted many of the computer training programmes at Lonmin herself and emphasised that computer illiteracy should be a big concern for the organisation. The IT manager referred to many employees who contact her daily to ask: "How does this work?" Many of the respondents related to the mining field also blamed insufficient training as a reason for under-utilisation of the intranet. The metallurgical manager remarked: "The lower-level employees at my plant have no idea how to use the intranet".

He added that many of the lower job levels share computers. Therefore, if they do get a chance to work on a computer, it is usually for other work-related tasks and not to learn how the intranet works and what it has to offer.

One respondent introduced another view on the issue of training. The biggest problem, according to him, is that he never received any training on how to use the intranet and that he does not have the time to figure out how the intranet works: "Because I'm not that clued up with the technology, I expect the navigation to be easy." This emphasises the issue of navigation – a serious concern with the Lonmin intranet (see section 4.5.3.4). If the navigation was more user-friendly, training would automatically need less attention.

Employees also made many suggestions regarding the issue of training. The training manager suggested that intranet training and awareness must be part of the induction programme. The HR manager suggested that an intranet tutorial must be

placed on the intranet, but another respondent remarked that a training manual for the intranet is not sufficient. He said that more advanced intranet training programmes should be provided.

The undeniable requirement by middle management for training with regard to the intranet supports the notion that the Lonmin intranet has a strong technological-orientated focus. It is complex and difficult to operate, which results in further under-utilisation of the intranet.

4.3.5 Intranet marketing

Many respondents expressed the view that intranet usage has not been encouraged and marketed sufficiently inside the organisation. According to one respondent, employees are unaware of the many advantages that an intranet could have for them: "The awareness that the intranet could serve as a two-way tool must be created, and employees must be aware of the different two-way functions, such as the discussion boards, that the intranet has to offer." She also indicated that feedback must be encouraged in such "campaigns".

Some respondents suggested the establishment of competitions on the intranet in order to market the medium and to encourage a culture of using the intranet. These competitions, according to one respondent, must be launched on the intranet, and must give prizes to the best developed and maintained intranet sites: "Competitions would increase involvement and ownership."

Intranet marketing is also related to intranet management. If the intranet was managed by the communication department, more effective ways would have been followed to communicate the benefits of the new technology and emphasise its impact on communication through well-planned internal marketing campaigns.

4.4 Internal communication and the Lonmin intranet

4.4.1 Message flow and other internal communication factors

One of the respondents remarked: "The intranet is currently just sharing information from the organisation's side to the employees." Similar views were expressed by other respondents as well. According to the environmental manager: "The intranet gives information from the organisation to the employees and not vice versa. Currently it is not a two-way tool."

Another respondent remarked that there have been attempts at making the intranet more two-way orientated (referring to the online vacancy applications that have been posted onto the intranet), but she felt that the intranet was still lacking a two-way nature. Like the majority of respondents, the internal communication manager felt that the Lonmin intranet played a "limited" role in the improvement of internal

communication, as it did not play a “real communication role and was basically just a repository of files and information”.

One example highlighted by a respondent indicated an extremely one-way approach to the management of the intranet. This particular respondent referred to an incident where he noticed that the structure of the intranet was wrong according to company hierarchy. He phoned a responsible person at IT to inform her about his observation, but: “I was told that it is not my problem and none of my business and that management has decided to let the structure look like this. I basically lost interest in the intranet thereafter.”

The training manager gave another example of such one-way approaches to the intranet, when she referred to some of the training courses that were advertised on the intranet without any room for feedback from employees: “If an employee is interested in a training course, there is no way for him to directly respond to the course or specify his needs, unless he phones me directly. You get what is on there and what you don’t find there you won’t have, because there is no space for employees to make their needs known.”

Another point mentioned by two respondents was the intranet’s inability to effectively kill rumours. One respondent referred to the resignation of a senior management member, and that rumours about the staff member’s resignation were going around in the offices long before the communication was made official: “The intranet is an ideal medium to kill rumours immediately, but it is not working effectively yet. The intranet has not established true transparency in the organisation.”

This view was shared by one of the other respondents when she admitted that people tend to trust the grapevine more than they trust official communication sources. Trust is a very important variable of two-way symmetrical communication and according to a number of respondents the intranet is not effective in establishing a mutual relationship of trust between the organisation (as the source of information) and its internal stakeholders.

One respondent believed that employees generally use e-mail much more often than they make use of the intranet. With respect to internal communication between employees, the respondent therefore felt that the intranet was not effective. Other respondents confirmed this statement by remarking that they would rather phone someone and ask them to e-mail them a specific document than go searching for it on the intranet.

An interesting view expressed by a number of respondents was that the intranet should not replace face to face communication or other traditional forms of communication. It seemed as if some respondents preferred the more traditional ways of communication: “Until we report our daily operations on the intranet, I don’t *need* the intranet. It must offer something to me, otherwise I would just continue to use traditional forms of communication, such as the telephone.”

One respondent reported that he did not use the discussion boards, because if he has a need to talk to someone he would rather do so in person than on a computer screen. The same view was also expressed by another respondent: "The intranet could be a tool to enhance internal communication, but should not replace face-to-face dialogue. Relationships are built on personal interaction and not on documents. A computer could never replace human interaction."

Respondents almost seemed afraid of the fact that the intranet would replace face-to-face communication in the organisation. This in itself could indicate an underlying feeling of mistrust with respect to the intranet or could also indicate a culture of resistance to innovation and new technology, as traditional media is still preferred by some employees. Or perhaps illustrates an either/or attitude.

The majority of respondents indicated that the flow of messages on the intranet is only from the organisation's side, thus indicating a crucial shortcoming of the intranet with respect to two-way symmetrical communication. A significant number of respondents indicated that the intranet is not an effective medium to kill rumours, and that the grapevine is still trusted more frequently than official communication on the intranet. Therefore, the intranet seemed to be inadequate to build a relationship of mutual trust in the organisation, at the time the study was conducted. Respondents' need for face-to-face communication could be related to the issue of trust and could indicate that they believe that the intranet could not establish true dialogue. Respondents also tend to cling to traditional forms of communication, which indicate a resistance to change and new technology, but perhaps also their high need for better, more open channels of internal communication.

4.4.2 The intranet as a tool to enhance collaboration

A respondent from the mining division believed that the intranet allows some form of interdepartmental collaboration, because the mining reports and production statistics from all three mines are available to read to everyone on the other mines. However, he admitted that the intranet is far from creating *direct* interdepartmental collaboration at the moment. The training manager believed that the intranet allowed some interdepartmental collaboration, because she frequently has a look at the training programmes on the Six Sigma site, or she referred employees to the Metallurgical or Technical Services websites. However, the majority of respondents believed that the intranet was not functioning as a real collaboration tool in the organisation at the time of the study.

One respondent suggested that the different departments must communicate with each other and determine which documents and content they need from other departments for their daily tasks, in order to create inter-departmental collaboration: "If each department identifies what content they would find useful from other departments, for example if our department needs certain documents from Technical Services, it would save a lot of time and phone calls."

The view that the intranet is more silo-driven was highlighted by two of the respondents. The IT manager commented that: "The intranet seems to be effective working in silos, but it is not process-driven," and another respondent added: "Every department sits on his own little throne and tries to protect it. The company still works in silos."

The above respondent referred to an example where he was working on a certain project, and discovered by accident that an employee from another department was tasked with the same project. To prevent similar incidents he suggested that the intranet should have a space where new projects must be communicated. The manager responsible for the specific project must give an indication of the various departments whose skills or knowledge would be required for the project. The respondent feels that this could have an effect on increasing participation and collaboration in the organisation.

On the topic of collaboration and internal communication the internal communication manager also believed that the intranet was still largely a one-way medium: "We push out the bulk of information via a link and the existing discussion forums are 'dead'."

She felt that the current intranet was a store place for various departments to store documents to make their *own* department perform more effectively, but that it was not necessarily used to *share* information and stimulate collaboration across departments. This view correlated with other respondents' views that the intranet was still primarily "silo-driven".

Teamwork, which is a concept of two-way symmetrical communication, does not appear to be encouraged with the current intranet, as respondents believed that the intranet did not create much inter-departmental collaboration and that the current intranet is still primarily "silo-driven".

In the light of the preceding discussion it is very important to note that shortcomings in the communication climate and a lack of positive, trustful relationships could not be fixed or changed by an intranet. The intranet could further enhance two-way symmetrical communication if applied correctly, but if the normal face-to-face communication and corporate culture is not what it should be, respondents would hardly trust technology to fix it.

4.4.3 Research: the value of consulting employees

Another important factor that is absent with regard to two-way symmetrical communication is that no formal research has been done before the intranet was launched. Many of the respondents admitted in the interviews that they were never consulted on what they would like to see on the intranet – a process very one-way in nature.

One respondent remarked that the reason why the intranet is not currently used as an effective internal communication tool is that it has been implemented without proper planning and without doing a proper needs analysis: "It feels to me as if the intranet has just been 'pasted' to our PC's without properly consulting us."

One respondent referred to one of the basic principles of two-way symmetrical communication when he remarked: "There must be a balance between the message the company wants to convey and the actual content needs of employees. It is important to involve people in a process for them to automatically take more ownership in the project." He said he does not know whether other employees were consulted in the intranet development process, but that he was never consulted.

Some respondents made the suggestion that a brainstorming session must be held by each department in the organisation to decide what content they would like to add to their specific sites by determining the content needs of the employees in their division.

The IT manager suggested that in order to create a sustainable intranet more employees must be consulted. She also suggested that the intranet must be benchmarked against other intranet sites to see what makes them unique and effective and where the Lonmin intranet is lacking.

Through respondents' responses it becomes clear that they feel that they were not completely involved in the intranet process, thus indicating that the intranet lacks another key principle of two-way symmetrical communication: involvement through planning and research.

4.5. Intranet usage patterns, interactivity and two-way symmetrical communication

4.5.1 Usage patterns and the function of the Lonmin intranet (intranet use-modes)

The following view, expressed by the environmental manager, seemed to be a general perception of most of the respondents interviewed. "The main function of the intranet as it is currently used is to give general information to employees. It is a central storage place where a wide variety of information is made available to all employees."

Focusing also on the intranet's information function, another respondent remarked: "The current intranet builds transparency. It gives all employees, especially those who have been deprived of information or did not know what was going on in the organisation, the opportunity to be more informed and obtain general information."

To this, the IT manager gave an answer very much aligned with the publishing use-mode of intranets (Damsgaard & Scheepers, 1999:335): "The intranet's current function, at least how employees are currently using it, is to share documentation."

One employee remarked that the intranet enhances free access to information and therefore also enhances effective real-time decision making. He explained: "Because information is freely available, anyone can use the information to make effective business decisions accordingly. The fact that reports are immediately available gives employees the opportunity to be pro-active instead of reactive."

He referred to the availability of production statistics and mining reports as an example and highlighted that these documents are used to predict business actions and make decisions accordingly. This view was highlighted by one of the respondents who used the intranet more often, and also for functions that were directly applicable to his daily work tasks.

The main function that most respondents thought the intranet fulfilled in the organisation, correlated quite strongly to what they used the intranet for. During the interviews it became evident that more than half of the respondents only use the intranet to get hold of "general company information". Only three managers admitted that they use the intranet for content and documents that is *directly* applicable to their daily work. Some of the respondents did use the intranet for job-related purposes from time to time such as accessing certain documents for work or using some of the applications. It occurred however to be very infrequent and not on a consistent basis. Other respondents, again, used the intranet *solely* for obtaining general company information and news. The most frequent uses of the intranet included: reading electronic newsletters and other official forms of communication such as internal press releases, platinum share prices, news from other mining organisations, business announcements such as new appointments or important decisions, policies and procedure documents and branding templates. The latter two documents are more related to direct work tasks.

Although three of the respondents indicated that they used the intranet very regularly for direct work-related content, they seemed to doubt whether this is the case for other employees. The training manager remarked: "I definitely use the intranet for work-related purposes, but I think it is not necessarily the case with employees in many of the other departments." She used the intranet for training prospectuses, information pieces on talent management and nominations. The training department has also developed a training programme that runs from the intranet. Two of the respondents noted that employees phone them regularly to obtain certain information from them, when the information is in fact published on the intranet and freely available to them already: "People come to me and complain that some of the road safety statistics are not made transparent and then I have to refer them to the link on the intranet. It gives me a good indication that some employees never even open my site."

It was interesting to note that the few respondents who used the intranet for daily work functioning and to perform work tasks, were more enthusiastic about the intranet's possibilities for Lonmin and generally seemed to be more specific in their frustrations, needs and expectations. They also had a serious need for the

confirmation of new content on the intranet. However, the intranet is not used by the majority of employees as a medium that is integrated with their daily functioning at work. Currently the intranet fulfils only the general need for information, and not the specific “tailored” content for their daily work functioning. However, this is not necessarily because tailored work-related content is not available on the intranet, but could also be the result of other reasons that have not been explored yet.

Ironically, the qualitative content analysis indicated that there were applications present on the Lonmin intranet that could be associated with much higher use-modes than what employees actually used the intranet for. Examples of such applications are the following:

- *Publishing*: newsletters, internal press releases production statistics, management presentations, protocols, strategy documents, branding templates, various policies, research reports and many other static published documents.
- *Transacting*: IT help desk, IT call logging system.
- *Interacting*: on-line vacancies, various discussion forums.
- *Searching*: search engine, boardroom bookings.
- *Recording*: online incident reporting.

One can conclude that the intranet was generally used by respondents as a medium to share general information within the organisation through the publishing of static documents (such as newsletters, press releases and business announcements), although applications associated with higher use-modes were visible through the content analysis. Therefore it seemed as if the Lonmin intranet was functioning primarily in the realm of the publishing use-mode of intranets – the least interactive and most static of the five intranet use-modes (Damsgaard & Scheepers, 1999:335).

4.5.2 Interactivity

4.5.2.1 Dimensions of interactivity

These results were obtained from the findings of the qualitative content analysis, as per the categories identified in chapter 3.

- *Playfulness*

Although games are not available on the intranet, the content analysis indicated that there are some applications that could allow a level of playfulness to the user, for instance the viewing of a slideshow of Lonmin pictures. This application could be of satisfaction to the user although not directly providing the user with the joy of playing a game. The slideshow has “play” and “rewind” buttons and offers colourful, vibrant images of Lonmin’s various operations. Another application that could be somewhat “playful” is the metric converter. This application converts different measuring units, e.g. Miles to Kilometres. It looks like a small digital calculator and is a very useful tool and is also enjoyable to use and quite interactive. Some animations on the intranet could also add “playfulness” to the intranet, although these animations must be

carefully applied in order not to annoy the user (which seemed the case of some animations on the Lonmin intranet). There were no competitions available on the intranet that could add to the dimension of playfulness. Therefore, one can conclude that the intranet only contributed moderately to the dimension of playfulness.

- *Choice*

According to the content analysis the Lonmin intranet does provide areas of choice to the user. There are many internal and external links on the web page and a wide variety of content to choose from.

The fact that some of the *Platinum Conversations* (a weekly electronic newsletter) and the *CEO newsletter* were translated into Tswana and Xhosa also adds to the dimension of choice. Although it is static documents, the user can choose whether he would like to read the newsletter in English, Tswana or Xhosa.

One application that also seems to add to the dimension of choice is that of boardroom bookings. This application allows more choice to employees because it gives them the option to choose between the available boardrooms and make a booking according to his/her specific needs. This application was also indicated to be one of the more useful applications according to respondents. It seems easy to use and a valuable application for users. The online vacancy reports is another interactive application on the intranet that allows choice, as employees can choose between a wide variety of positions and can also choose whether he would like to apply online or offline.

Another interactive application on the intranet that could add to the dimension of choice is the "My Site" application. This function allows the user to customise the content. The user can add links or content to his own personalised site. It has a public and a personal domain, therefore the user can choose whether he would like to save the documents on the public domain (for everyone's viewing) or store documents only for his own, personal use and his access only.

Secured areas and restricted access to the World Wide Web limits the dimension of choice on the Lonmin intranet. Many employees in the organisation do not have access to the World Wide Web, because management fears that the medium would be misused for inappropriate or non-work related matters. There are many external links on the intranet (e.g. links to Platinum mining information, the Lonmin Development Trust's website and some environmental external links etc.), which implies that employees who do not have access to the Internet will not be able to visit these links. This limits their choice as users, because their access to the WWW is denied. Some areas on the intranet are also secured such as the Chief Executive Forum documents, financial results and the appraisal review system. Although it is important to treat some applications or documents as sensitive it still limits the user's choice. It could be frustrating for an employee who wants to view content from the Chief Executive Forum's meetings to receive a message that his/her access was denied. This also limits transparency on the intranet.

Many pages on the intranet have no listings to display, in other words, they are still empty. This limits choice because if a user specifically chooses to read the content inside the "biographies" link and it is empty, such a response immediately narrows his choice.

Generally, the dimension of choice was applied to the Lonmin intranet, but the choice dimension could improve if all employees are given access to the Internet and if all the pages on the intranet have information to display.

- *Connectedness*

Not only does the intranet offer a wide variety of internal links, but there is also external links on the intranet, which adds to the dimension of connectedness. A good example of an external link that provides connectedness is a link that leads to the latest mining related articles. This external link contains information on competitors' strategic business decisions as well as important business decisions made by Lonmin. The intranet has direct links to Reuters and Hemscott, thus providing employees with the most recent platinum share prices. The daily Rand/Dollar exchange rate and the Platinum price also flash on the main page of the intranet. All these applications provide employees with a feeling of being "connected to the outside world". The daily news clippings and share price values also give employees the feeling that they are aware of what is going on in the outside world. The intranet does not have a content-rich pressroom, however this could be considered as a valuable function to answer in employee's information needs. One respondent also suggested that the intranet must be accessible from anywhere outside the organisation (e.g. a hotel room) through the WWW. This, according to the respondent, would add more connectivity to the intranet. Generally though, the intranet does provide a level of connectedness to the outside world.

- *Information collection*

The IT department compiles a monthly report that states how many hits and visits the intranet has. This report includes the daily figures of visitors on the intranet site and gives the IT department an indication of how frequently the intranet is visited by employees. The intranet contained very few forms of online questionnaires that could serve as a method of information collection from employees. The only such questionnaire was an intranet survey that tested the effectiveness of the intranet in terms of layout, navigation, content and general problems experienced. The results of this survey were made available on the intranet. Some applications that could serve as information collection tools are the serious incident report system and the performance appraisal review. The first application gives employees an opportunity to report any serious incidents on the mine, thus it serves as a method to determine what serious incidents are threatening the safety on the mine. Another very interactive application, the performance review, is an HR application that is used to measure employees' work performances according to certain principles by HR, thus this tool gives information to HR on how employees are currently performing in the organisation. All in all, the intranet allows some areas of information collection, but

the focus should be on adding more devices on the intranet to collect data through research, such as surveys and questionnaires.

- *Reciprocal communication*

There are many applications available on the Lonmin intranet that allows feedback from users, for instance a communication discussion board, an HR discussion board, room for discussing the code of ethics, posting a question about the new active directory, submitting ideas for the Six Sigma projects, the reporting of serious incidents and making requests on technical services issues. The content analysis indicated that there was not a lack of applications that provided feedback from users, but it seemed as if employees were not using them. Real conversation has not started between employees and feedback did not seem to be immediate. Respondents confirmed that they used the dialogue enabling tools on the intranet very infrequently, thus reflecting a clear discrepancy between the reality of the intranet and middle management's perceptions of it.

As a test, a question was posted to one of the discussion boards. After five days of viewing the discussion board for a reply, there was still no response from any of the employees. These "discussions" could not count as true dialogue, because very few queries made by employees ever received a response.

Only seven discussions have been published on the communication discussion board during a time period of four months. Prior to the question posted by the researcher as a test, the last entry was a month ago. Although questions are usually raised during these discussions, only one of the questions was responded to publicly. The possibility exists that these questions were answered privately and that some of the discussions did continue, but not on the discussion boards. However, the discussion boards seemed to be completely under-utilised, at least during the time the content analysis was conducted. The suggestion that anonymity must be added as an option for users (thus also adding to the dimension of choice) could be kept in mind, as employees might feel "exposed" if they make their opinions known in the organisation.

With respect to more reactive communication functions, the content analysis indicated that there are e-mail links and contact details on almost all the pages and specifically to the content contributor of the page. The intranet provided many interactive and reactive communication tools, but again they were under-utilised by many employees – confirming the views as expressed by respondents.

4.5.2.2 Interactive applications used by respondents

According to the results of the semi-structured interviews, most of the applications available on the intranet were used very infrequently by the managers who were interviewed. Some of the respondents were not even aware of many of the applications that the intranet had to offer.

It became evident that the only applications that respondents used from time to time, was the boardroom bookings, online vacancy applications, the discussion boards and the performance appraisal system. However, it would appear that employees do not always use these applications of free will: "I only used the performance appraisal system, because I am forced to use it by the HR department."

The IT manager noted that she uses some of the IT applications that are launched from the intranet, such as the Helpdesk calls log system or the order book. The training manager also referred to an interactive training programme that has been developed for the training department by an external company. She complained about the many technical problems she experienced with the application of this programme onto the intranet and remarked that there is not yet an active link to this programme on the intranet.

Although the discussion boards and similar functions are probably the best tools to create dialogue and two-way symmetrical communication in the organisation, only *one* of the respondents interviewed made a comment on the communications discussion forum (confirming the results of the content analysis). A few of the respondents read the discussion forums from time to time. However, a significant number of respondents were not even aware of the fact that the intranet had such a facility to offer.

The discussion boards were evoking different views from respondents. The majority felt that it is a "handy tool", but it was also highlighted that many respondents were not even aware of it. Thus, there are diverse perceptions regarding this facility.

As mentioned earlier, most respondents found it very interesting to read the remarks on the discussion boards. They did not deny the fact that it is a valuable tool for the organisation. Referring to some remarks that have been made about his specific department one respondent pointed out: "The discussion boards give me an indication on what is bothering employees about my department and on what areas I need to focus."

Another employee reported although she did not read the comments on the intranet she sometimes read discussions on the Internet, because it could be very useful for research purposes and to determine public opinion. This view of using employees responses as a research tool to determine their own actions could be applied to a two-way symmetrical or asymmetrical view of communication (depending on the actions one choose to take according to the feedback).

Although the discussion boards were described by one of the respondents as "very interactive", that respondent emphasised that he was not very keen on making his opinion known to the rest of the organisation: "The few comments that are on the discussion boards have been there ever since the launch of the intranet and never get removed."

He also admitted that there is not an active culture of sharing in the organisation. Another respondent who admitted that he would rather speak to someone in person than on a computer where the whole organisation can read it, shared this view. Employees also raised the issue of not knowing how to use the discussion boards and similar applications (also see section 4.3.4) and that they simply do not have the time to find out how to use them.

The only active participant in the discussion boards blamed under-utilisation of this facility on the corporate culture in the organisation: "The intranet itself allows interactivity, although interactivity amongst employees are not high yet." He further adds that it is not how these interactivity functions are applied on the intranet, but rather about the culture amongst employees (a view that correlates with the findings described in section 4.4). "Employees surely want a medium to let their voice be heard, but I think they are scared to make their names publicly known – I think many employees prefer anonymity."

Another respondent made a remark that added to the organisational culture and the issue of anonymity: "Lonmin is very union-driven. Everyone talks in groups and not as individuals. The discussion boards are an individual tool and people are still scared to make their individual opinions known."

The suggestion of implementing a chat room on the intranet was made by a respondent. This feature could play a significant part in enhancing dialogue and two-way communication and could also add to the dimension of playfulness. The respondent added, however, that such an application might not be a good idea with the current changes and uncertainty in the organisation. She said that people tend to be oversensitive at the moment. Another respondent gave an example of one of the more negative attributes of dialogue-enabling tools. He said that the HR discussion board has turned into a "bitching tool". According to him employees are getting aggressive in their communication on the discussion boards and that they tend to attack the person instead of the problem. A concern raised by another respondent, and not without reason, is the possibility of the misuse of feedback-tools and similar facilities. She referred to an example in her previous work, where employees used the advertisement function on the intranet as a way to pull pranks on each other. Respondents indicated that they had a wide variety of concerns regarding the issue of reciprocal communication.

A significant number of employees indicated that they found it very useful that new documents get flagged on the home page (another interactive function that is provided by the intranet), but some concerns were raised with respect to the "newness" of documents. Many respondents said that it is interesting to view the daily platinum prices from Reuters and indicated that this interactive application (which adds to the dimension of connectedness) was one of their favourites.

The "My Site" application is a useful application as well, according to the IT manager, but she admits that no-one is using it properly, because there are so many contact

details that are not up to date. She believes that many employees are not aware of how to actually use this application (also confirming the theory of a lack of intranet training – section 4.3.4).

The IT manager remarked that: “There are so many employees who just seem to go ‘over’ the intranet.” This is an important input with respect to intranet use in Lonmin. Although the content analysis indicated that the intranet definitely provides interactive applications and contained many of the dimensions of interactivity (albeit only moderately so in some cases), it was indicated in the responses that respondents do not use these applications that frequently. Similar findings were obtained with regard to the various intranet use-modes.

The intranet itself provides applications that could be applied to the highest use-mode of intranets (the recording use mode in the case of the performance appraisal system and the incident reporting), but employees only utilised the intranet in the publishing use-mode. This study would further investigate reasons for this discrepancy.

4.5.3 Two-way symmetrical principles on the Lonmin intranet

4.5.3.1 Dialogic/feedback loop

In section 4.5.2.1 the reciprocal dimension of interactivity was described. This dimension correlates strongly with the dialogic/feedback loop principle of two-way symmetrical communication. As described in the preceding section, the Lonmin intranet had many dialogical/reciprocal communication devices built into it, as the content analysis proved (discussion forums, posting of ideas, reporting of incidents etc.) However, it is ironic that although there were dialogic devices built into the intranet, there were no real two-way communication between different employees, departments and management levels (as middle management’s responses have proven). Firstly, employees did not use the dialogic tools available on the intranet (the content analysis proved that the discussions on the discussion forums were ill populated). The internal communication manager herself said that existing discussion forums were “dead”. Secondly, no feedback and response were given to the very few comments that were made on the discussion boards. The discussion forums did not succeed in creating dialogic conversations where feedback was given to employees’ questions, concerns and ideas.

According to Naudé, Froneman and Atwood (2004), web-based technology automatically obtains a more strategic function if qualified practitioners are employed to *answer in the information needs of publics*. Kent and Taylor (1998) made it clear that trained communication people should address publics’ concerns in order to contain the dialogic/feedback loop principle of two-way symmetrical communication. In the interviews, one employee remarked that he had a problem with the way something on the intranet was set-up (as was mentioned earlier in section 4.4.1). He was annoyed with the fact that when he tried to give feedback on the structure of the

intranet, his input was not valued and the response he received was not typical of a symmetrical approach. A qualified communication expert would have known to handle the issue differently. The feedback this respondent received made him apathetic to the intranet and made him lose interest in it after the particular incident. If the intranet had a qualified communication expert to handle the situation and give the proper feedback, this would not have been the case.

Although the intranet had applications that contributed to the dialogic/feedback loop principle of two-way symmetrical communication, the true dialogue and feedback elements of a two-way symmetrical conversation were not present because of the clear discrepancy with regard to how these applications were used by respondents. Therefore the intranet did not add to the first principle of two-way symmetrical communication.

4.5.3.2 Generation of return visits

The literature study indicated that the generation of return visits depends on new content being provided to employees in order for them to visit the intranet again. Two features that give credibility to the newness of content on the intranet, according to the content analysis, is the flagging of new documents and posting the publication date of a document next to the specific document. By viewing the amount of "new" flags on the intranet and by assessing the dates when the documents were published, it seemed as if new documents got published onto the intranet fairly regularly. A cause of concern, however, is the fact that no old documents had apparently been removed since the start of the intranet. Although this may not immediately present a problem, as the intranet expands it could result in a very disorganised and confusing intranet site. For instance, a total of 40 CEO newsletters are posted on the intranet into one long, static list. In three years, the total of CEO newsletters would obviously have tripled. Similar cases of redundant content were found under some of the mining production statistics. There also seemed to be no repository system in place that accurately stored old information. The content analysis thus indicated that it did not seem as if business administrators ever removed old content from the intranet and that there was not a proper storing mechanism in place to store these documents. However, most of the sites were updated regularly (e.g. mining, Six Sigma, Services and the home page), with only a few sites that seemed to be updated less frequently (e.g. the financial and HR site).

It was interesting to note that the more regular intranet users put a stronger emphasis on their need for new and updated content. This is understandable because they visit the intranet more frequently and therefore have a greater need to know what is new on the intranet. As mentioned in the previous section, many respondents remarked that they found the flagging of new content on the home page and the rest of the intranet very effective and useful. However, some respondents pointed out that this function in itself was not effective enough and that they required an alternative method to notify them on new documents.

Realising the importance of generation of return visits, one regular intranet user remarked: "One specific way to sustain intranet usage in the organisation is by always offering something new to the user." He argued that the flagging of new documents are only effective on the home page, because one can immediately see what is new if one opens the intranet home page. However, if you do not go and search or actively look around on the other sites you would be unaware of any new content. He therefore suggested that a site map must be placed on every department's home page. This site map must give a broad exposition of all the content on the site and must include "new" icons next to the most recent documents – similar to the home page. The HR manager also suggested a site map in order to improve the structure and navigation of the intranet. A site map could thus play a double function: it could add to better structure and navigation, and it could also give users a more effective indication of new content the site has to offer.

Adding to the issue of new content, one respondent noted: "There is nothing that draws people directly to the intranet and no box of highlights that indicate where new content has been published unless you accidentally open the site where the new document was published." He referred to a job advertisement that was published on the intranet, of which he was unaware, because there is not an effective system that notified him about the new advertisement. Someone told him about it coincidentally, and although he is very interested in the specific position, he would not have known about it if someone did not tell him about it.

The fact that the older content is never removed from the intranet seems to be a problem for many of the respondents, as it makes them question the accuracy of the documents they are using. This perception of respondents is supported by the content analysis. The IT manager remarked: "I think a lot of new information gets posted on the intranet, but the old content does not necessarily get removed. Some outdated information is still posted on the intranet and takes up space unnecessary." She concluded that the intranet does not have a proper archiving system in place for old information.

One respondent remarked that although she could view the date when a certain document was published she was still uncertain whether that specific document was not recently changed or updated, because the old content never gets removed. She therefore suggested that when an old policy has changed and is replaced with a new one, the person who was responsible for the change of content should notify employees through an e-mail that the specific policy had changed. A link must also be mailed to employees with the most recent policy that has replaced previous ones.

It seemed that although the intranet got updated relatively frequently, respondents were not always aware of the new content on the intranet, because the flagging system was only perceived to be effective on the home page and not on any of the other pages on the intranet. Furthermore, it was indicated that old content was not removed on the intranet and this could result in a disorganised intranet. The intranet

contained a few ways to enable the principle of generation of return visits, but some attention should be given to the areas that have been discussed.

4.5.3.3 Usefulness of information

There is a very wide variety of content available on the intranet but it is difficult to objectively determine its relevancy, accuracy and suitability through the content analysis. The intranet contains a wide variety of policies, reports, presentations, procedures, codes, lists, strategic documents, protocols, financial results, models, structures, timetables, statistics, branding templates, maps and routes, newsletters and other official communication pieces. These documents seem to be relevant according to the various business divisions where they were published, but the interviews served as a more effective guideline to determine the relevance of the content provided on the intranet. Tredinnick and Tilly (2001) argued that the relevance of the content depends on the objective of the site. If one views the general objective of the Lonmin intranet as “to make appropriate reports readily and easily available, to provide a single storage for policies and procedures and to standardise company branding and stationary,” then the overall documents on the intranet could arguably be regarded as relevant.

It was picked up that on some of the intranet sites only one or two documents were posted (e.g. the mechanisation and automation site) and in some cases there were no listings to display (e.g. the corporate calendar, biographies links). Although the links were already created, the content of the site was empty. It therefore shows that there was still some content to add to the intranet. Yet on other pages there were some content “clutter” (the publishing of newsletters and daily production statistics), where it seemed as if none of the documents were ever being removed after being published.

With respect to accuracy, the content analysis indicated that there is some inaccurate information on the intranet, especially with regard to contact information. Contact information, however, should be updated individually by employees through the “My site” application. The fact that many contact details were not updated gives an indication that employees did not really use the “My site” function (confirming a remark from the IT manager). Some other inaccuracies that were picked up through the content analysis included the use of the old logo on some of the documents published, or the fact that some of the departments had never changed their positioning in terms of company structure or naming – for instance, Road Safety now falls under Safety, Health, Environmental and Security, but it is still located under the Services site on the intranet; and Human Resources (HR) is now known as “Human Capital”, but the old name was still used on the intranet when the content analysis was conducted.

The general perceptions of middle management of the content on the intranet did not seem to be too conflicting. Respondents seemed to be generally satisfied with the content, as they indicated that: “there is some very useful information on the

intranet"; "the intranet "offers quite a wide variety of information"; "it is definitely relevant" and "it offers documents that are of a good quality for the different business divisions."

It seemed that the majority of respondents felt that the content which is available on the intranet is relevant, with the exception of one employee who thought that the intranet was not answering in his information needs at all.

Some respondents remarked that there is a lot of content on the intranet that could be added (such as more policies, procedures and standards), but the content which was available was definitely relevant. One respondent mentioned that she can see that the intranet is still in progress, by viewing the number of empty pages on the intranet. Another respondent cited empty pages as a reason for a lot of his frustration: "Why is there a link to a certain page if there is no information to display underneath it. It just does not make sense."

Redundant content was a frustration for many respondents. They doubted whether old documents were ever removed by any of the business administrators, as mentioned above: "Content tends to clutter on the intranet." Another responded had a similar view: "It's not effective if fifty documents are posted on the intranet while employees only make use of two of the fifty documents published."

With respect to recent and updated content, the majority of respondents believed that new documents are frequently posted on the intranet, but some expressed their concern that they were usually not aware of it. Old content was not removed and therefore employees questioned the accuracy of some of the documents. The accuracy of content is difficult to determine, according to one respondent. He mentions that the content on his department's site is always accurate and adds that: "Most of the content on the intranet is supposed to be accurate because it is verified by the content owners."

Contradictory to his remark, however, the respondent from HR said that she is not sure whether all the content owners have been trained and identified yet. She also admitted that she was not sure who their department's content owner was or whether he was identified. Another respondent also seemed to be unsure about who their department's content owner was; he was not even sure whether they had one. In general, accuracy seemed to be questioned by a few of the respondents interviewed. One respondent remarked that she picked up documents which contained unprofessional use of grammar and that she also came across job advertisements which were published under the wrong departments. Likewise, a respondent indicated that some of the content of the documents was not presented professionally.

One respondent's honest remark with regard to the issue of useful content should not be ignored: "I can really not give you an honest opinion about the content, because I use so little of the content which is published on the intranet. I simply pick up the phone if I need a document, because it is so much easier."

Respondents' perceptions of the content on the intranet were only based on the documents that they use (and as indicated above, the majority of respondents only used the intranet for "general company information").

Another respondent remarked: "The problem of the intranet does not lie in its content, but in the accessibility of the content."

Consequently, it would appear that employees do not use the content on the intranet very often, because they cannot access it easily. The next section describes the ease of interface of the intranet, and investigates whether or not the intranet is easy to use and whether information is easy to access.

4.5.3.4 Intuitiveness/ease of interface

- *Visual appearance*

Before any of the results of the visual appearance and structure of the intranet could be described, it is important to give a brief overview of the visual appearance and structure of the Lonmin intranet, in order to obtain a better understanding of the rest of the results.

The Lonmin intranet was consistent with the Lonmin corporate identity. Although it appeared to be overcrowded with links on some of the pages, the general repeat of the corporate colours (blue and grey) gave it a professional first impression. A standard font and font colour were also used throughout all the sites. The home page had a menu bar with links to Lonmin's most important business divisions, for example SHEC (Safety, Health, Environment and Community), Six Sigma, ERP/SCC, HR, Finance, IT, Mining, Process Division, Services and the official Lonmin Internet site.

The home page contains a flash graphic that gives the daily Platinum prices and Rand/Dollar exchange rates displayed at the top left of the page. The Lonmin logo is placed in the corner of the top left of the home page. This is a standard feature on all the other sites as well. Another standard feature is the "My Site" link, "Help" link and the search engine, which is situated on the top right of all pages.

The home page and each of the other sub-sites in which the home page is divided has a graphic on the right hand side of the page (this was a visual that was used in the Lonmin Annual Report). There was also a "highlight box", with links to some of the company highlights situated on the left of the home page. However, some of the links in the highlight box were duplicated on the right hand side of the home page, just beneath the image.

Figure 4.5.3.4 shows a visual presentation of the Lonmin intranet's home page at the time the study was conducted. This illustration supports the preceding description of the intranet.

- *Visual design*

Although the qualitative content analysis indicates that the visual design of the intranet is not poor, some areas need attention. The use of colours, fonts and images looks professional and correlates with corporate identity and branding. Blue and grey are consistently used as the corporate colour of the intranet. The graphics are well designed and professional and a consistent font is used on most of the pages.

Two areas that need attention in terms of visual design are the intranet home page and the use of flash graphics and animations. The home page is extremely busy. There are a total of 50 links visible on the home page, illogical icons are placed next to some of the links and although the corporate colours are consistent, the uses of these icons and of other animations seem to give a disorganised, "busy" feel to the home page. Attention must also be given to some animated graphics that have no specific purpose. Many of these animations are in bright, distracting colours and are therefore not aligned with Lonmin's corporate colours. Too many animated graphics could be annoying and could easily distract or irritate the user, especially if they serve no purpose. The only animation with a definite purpose that was also very popular among respondents was the scrolling of the daily Platinum share prices and the Rand/Dollar rates from Reuters at the top of the home page.

The IT manager also suggested a more "clean, professional and elegant" look for the intranet: "Some areas are definitely too busy, too cluttered and in some cases too static." Yet, she admitted that she liked the colours and standard graphics and that the intranet was well aligned with Lonmin branding. She suggested a bigger top menu bar. Another respondent remarked that he found some of the animations irritating. Most of the responses by middle management are supported by the qualitative content analysis.

Generally, the look and feel of the intranet is acceptable. Not too much focus needs to be given to this area, the home page could be cleaned up and some of the animations may be removed.

Figure 4.5.3.4: Lonmin intranet home page
Source: Lonmin intranet site.



- *Navigation and user-friendliness*

One of the biggest areas of concern highlighted by respondents and one which is also supported by the content analysis is the issue of navigation and user-friendliness of the Lonmin intranet.

Compared to other areas on the intranet (such as the interactivity features, content and visual design) the content analysis indicated that navigation on the intranet seemed to be the least effective. The only navigation that seems to be consistent and structured is the top menu bar that leads to the different departments. If one enters these sites, however, no consistent pattern or structure is found with respect to the navigation.

One example of confusing navigation is the heading of a link which leads to the same content as the subdivisions beneath it. For instance, there is a heading labelled "tax", while "tax status reports" and "tax updates" are sub-links underneath it, but by clicking on "tax", the user is also taken to "tax status reports" and "tax updates". This creates confusion. It would be more logical if the heading of an area was not a hyperlink. Furthermore, there seemed to be much duplication of links on the intranet. The mining site, which is also the highest populated site on the intranet, had many duplicated links. The technical services links are located on the mining site as well as the services site, but the contents of these two sites are not the same. The home page, for instance, has two separate links which lead to the same information (e.g. a link to the promotion to access of information and the share prices). Therefore, in some cases the duplication of links lead to the same information and in other cases the same links lead to different information – the latter is even more confusing.

There also seemed to be some broken links on the intranet (e.g. a link to environmental assessment and documents, a link to the MSDS main index and links to monthly safety statistics underneath the processes site). The search engine did not seem to be effective either. As a test, a key word was put into the search engine. Although this information was available on the intranet, the search engine did not pick it up. The search engine was more effective in finding very general results (e.g. "health"), but ineffective in more specialised searches.

In correspondence with the findings of the content analysis, all respondents complained about the navigation and user-friendliness of the intranet during the interviews. It seemed to be the biggest frustration to the vast majority of the respondents interviewed. One respondent admitted that he found the user-friendliness of the intranet more acceptable than at the beginning. The only reason for this is because he now knows where to find what he is looking for, always visits the same site and never looks around for new content on other sites. Another respondent indicated that: "A person is not actually supposed to know that much about the system to use it. However, with the current intranet you would have a very hard time to find the information if you do not know where it is already".

Similarly, the metallurgical manager remarked: "I find the user-friendliness of the intranet very poor. It takes too many clicks for me to find the information and because I do not always have the time I simply do not use the intranet."

In fact, he uses the intranet so little and the navigation is so poor that he admitted that he was not sure where his department was situated on the intranet. One respondent who was directly involved in mining said it would be interesting to view the mining statistics of other departments from time to time, but "the number of clicks" he has to follow to get to "a simple document" is just too frustrating for him. Like many other users, he eventually stopped looking for the content all together.

A few employees remarked that if they struggled too much to find something, even if they knew the document was available on the intranet, they would rather phone colleagues to ask that they e-mail them the document than waste their own time to keep looking for it on the intranet (refer to the use of traditional media in section 4.4.1).

The training manager also complained about navigation and user-friendliness. She explained that she daily received many phone calls from employees who are unable to find the training main site on the intranet. It is frustrating for her, because no one automatically knows that training would fall under the "services" main link on the menu bar. Confirming her frustration, another respondent remarked: "I often expect certain information to be underneath a particular heading, but then it is not where I expected it to be." To solve the problem, the training manager suggested drop-down menus on the main menu bar, to give a better indication of the sub-divisions that falls underneath a specific area.

One respondent said that an effective search engine would make it much easier to find the content he is looking for on the intranet. However, like a significant number of other employees, he felt that the search engine is currently very ineffective: "If the search engine is effective it would not be necessary for me to search hours for information."

One respondent expressed his frustration with what he called the "architecture" of the intranet: "Links are sometimes illogically structured and the way that the various departments are positioned does not always make sense. The interaction between departments is limited at the moment and there is not much integration, because the current architecture is not logical according to company structure." Many respondents complained about the intranet's illogical design as compared to the actual structure of the company.

Some respondents suggested that a team of employees must re-think the structure of the intranet when the new Shared Services model is put into practice. The company structure would change after the implementation of this model, therefore it would be inevitable to change the structure of the intranet as well.

The content analysis and the perceptions of respondents indicated that the navigation of the intranet should be a vital area of concern. Currently, it seems illogical and unstructured and a different approach must be taken to sort out the navigation on the intranet in future.

4.5.3.5 The rule of conservation of visitors

According to the literature this principle of two-way symmetric communication is based on the fact that links should not lead users astray by putting too much links that leads to other sites on the intranet. On an intranet it is very important that a user must find his/her way "back" to the intranet, as an intranet is often the only online source of internal information (Agarwal, 2001).

The content analysis has proven that the Lonmin intranet had a few links that lead to external sites (e.g. the Lonmin Development Trust, some external environmental and legal sites, mining news sites, Reuters and the official Lonmin Internet site). However, these links opened in a different window, and it therefore seemed easy for the user to get his way back to the intranet. Instead of leading users astray, these external links rather added to a feeling of connectedness to the outside world (as described in section 4.5.2.1) and could be seen as a positive factor to establish interactivity.

One negative aspect regarding the conservation of visitors is the fact that it is difficult for the user to go "back" if you click on some of the internal documents. For instance, if one clicks on a policy document that is in a PDF format, the PDF document opens in the same window as the current window. If the user then clicks on the "back" icon in Windows Internet Explorer, the user is not taken back to the original site. This is extremely frustrating and ineffective. It means that the user has to close the window, re-click on Internet Explorer to get access to the intranet again and then search the page where he/she was before exiting the site. This time-consuming, frustrating process to return to a certain page could discourage users from returning to the spot where they had been, which means that the Lonmin intranet is not very effective in conserving visitors.

4.6 Conclusion

Generally, the vast majority of employees believed in the potential of the intranet. It was viewed by some employees as a "communication tool" and most respondents believed that it could have a significant impact on internal communication. However, most respondents also believed that the Lonmin intranet was far from reaching its potential as an internal communication medium, for reasons such as the management of the intranet, the internal communication climate and factors relating to intranet use-modes, interactivity and principles of two-way symmetry.

It was shown that there is an inseparable relation between intranet management and the organisation's internal communication climate. An intranet could not contribute to

two-way symmetrical communication if the corporate culture does not encourage an environment of two-way symmetrical communication, trust, participation and involvement. Neither could an intranet contribute to two-way symmetrical communication if it is not managed by the communication department who follows an operational strategy to intranet management and make provision for the intranet as a communication medium in the internal communication strategy.

Lonmin's corporate culture did not support two-way symmetrical communication and neither was it managed by the communication department. Communication deficiencies could not be solved by an intranet, but if managed strategically the intranet could contribute to two-way symmetrical communication. The intranet is only a *medium* and should not be seen as a wonder cure to solve deep-rooted internal communication issues; however, it should be managed strategically and be viewed as one of many means to an end.

With regard to intranet use-modes, interactivity and two-way symmetrical communication principles, the intranet also proved to have some shortcomings, all of which would be concluded in the following chapter in order to answer the applicable research questions.

Chapter 5: Conclusions and recommendations

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter the findings of the literature study and the results of the qualitative content analysis and interviews with respondents are concluded in order to answer the four research questions formulated in chapter 1. The five theoretical statements in chapter 2 served as a guideline to draw the research findings and the theory together.

In the last section of this chapter, general recommendations and suggestions will be made to improve intranet management in order to establish two-way symmetrical communication in future at Lonmin.

5.2 An intranet's role in establishing two-way symmetrical communication

Research Question (RQ) 1: How can an intranet establish two-way symmetrical communication?

To answer this research question, five theoretical statements were formulated, summarising theory and literature to serve as guideline for and a link with the empirical part of the study. This research question was therefore answered by investigating the literature and identifying five central theoretical statements. The statements that follow are a summary of the full statements, which were thoroughly described in chapter 1 and chapter 3.

5.2.1 Orientation regarding literature

Public relations theory has identified employees as a key public and one of an organisation's most strategic stakeholders (Murgolo-Poore & Pitt, 2000; Lubbe & Puth, 2002). Public relations could be practised according to one of four theoretical models. In chapter 1 these four models were described and the two-way symmetrical model of public relations was identified as the most ethical and effective model to practice public relations (Grunig, Grunig & Dozier, 2002). Therefore communication management must establish two-way symmetrical communication patterns between the organisation and employees in order to practice the most ethical and effective communication with stakeholders (Grunig, Grunig & Dozier, 2002; Naudé, 2001). There are several ways to create two-way symmetrical communication patterns, either through interpersonal or mediated communication.

Public relations and new media theory highlighted that new technology (because of its interactive capabilities) have the potential to create two-way symmetrical communication (Naudé, Froneman & Atwood, 2004; Esrock & Leichty, 2000; Kent, Taylor & White, 2003; Steyn, Grobler & Cilliers, 2005). However theory also stressed that new media are still

under-utilised in South African public relations as a strategic relationship management tool and two-way symmetrical communication medium (Steyn, Grobler & Cilliers, 2005; Swart & Verwey, 2003).

5.2.2 Theoretical statement 1

The literature study concluded that in order for an intranet to be two-way symmetrical in nature it must focus less on the technology (Banck & Nyström, 2005; Yen & Chou, 2001; Steyn, Grobler & Cilliers, 2005). An intranet that is too technologically focussed estranges employees from the medium, is too complicated and is often under-utilised (Cumming & Cuthbertson, 2001; Leonard, 2005). Employees must be trained to understand an intranet's two-way symmetrical capabilities (Yen & Chou, 2001), in order to optimise the technological applications that an intranet provide; otherwise it would result in discrepancies between the applications present on the intranet and the actual usage thereof (Banck & Nyström, 2005).

5.2.3 Theoretical statement 2

An intranet must also move into more interactive use-modes in order to be two-way symmetrical (Damsgaard & Scheepers, 2000). The publishing use-mode is applicable to a public information model of public relations and the transacting use-mode only complies with technological connectivity (Panteli, Tsiourva and Modelly, 2005). It is only within the interactive use-mode, searching use-mode and recording use-mode where two-way symmetrical communication could be established (Damsgaard & Scheepers, 2000; Grunig, Grunig & Dozier, 2002).

5.2.4 Theoretical statement 3

An intranet can only be two-way symmetrical if it is managed by communication managers who focus on Excellence in public relations management and who follow an operational strategy to the intranet (Steyn, Grobler & Cilliers, 2005). The IT department must provide a service to the communication department (such as building interactive applications). However, if the intranet is managed solely by the IT department a functional, more tactical strategy is followed to intranet management, which tends to be one-way in nature.

5.2.5 Theoretical statement 4

Literature has shown a very strong correlation between interactivity and two-way symmetry. If an intranet is interactive, it can therefore also enhance two-way symmetrical communication. Ha and James (1998) identified five interactive dimensions to describe the interactive capabilities of new media. If an intranet complies with these dimensions it could be viewed as interactive and also potentially as two-way symmetrical.

These dimensions are playfulness, choice, connectedness, information collection and reciprocal communication.

5.2.6 Theoretical statement 5

Kent and Taylor (1998), Naudé, Froneman and Atwood (2003) and Kent, Taylor and White (2003), among others, have examined the application of two-way symmetrical principles on new technology. The following five principles must be purposefully applied to new technology in order to contribute more effectively to two-way symmetrical communication: the dialogic loop, usefulness of information, generation of return visits, intuitiveness/ease of interface and the rule of conservation of visitors (Kent & Taylor, 1998).

5.2.7 Summary: Research Question 1

Thus, the first research question may be answered as follows, guided by all five theoretical statements:

- Intranets should be less technologically driven and management must provide training to employees in order for them to optimise all technological applications provided on the intranet.
- It should move beyond the publishing use-mode into more interactive use-modes.
- Intranets must be managed by the communication department in order to contribute to two-way symmetrical communication in the organisation.
- It must contribute to the dimensions of interactivity.
- It must contribute to the principles of two-way symmetrical communication.

5.3 The Lonmin intranet's application of two-way symmetrical communication

RQ 2: How are the basic principles of two-way symmetrical communication applied to the Lonmin intranet?

To answer this research question, the researcher was guided by the second, the fourth and the fifth theoretical statements. This research question was addressed by means of the qualitative content analysis.

5.3.1 The intranet's application of intranet use-modes

According to the qualitative content analysis, guided by the second theoretical statement, the intranet proved to have applications available that is associated with the highest use-mode of intranets (Damsgaard & Scheepers, 1999:335). The intranet had applications published on it that could be associated with the publishing use-mode, transacting use-mode, interacting use-mode, searching use-mode and recording use-mode. As such, the

intranet did contain two-way symmetrical communication facets as it had applications available associated with all five identified use-modes by Damsgaard and Scheepers (1999:335). However, it was also found that respondents predominantly used the intranet for content and applications that correlated with a publishing use-mode of intranets. This discrepancy will be described further in section 5.4.5.

5.3.2 The intranet's application of the dimensions of interactivity

The goal of this section is to determine whether or not the Lonmin intranet complied with the dimensions of interactivity, as highlighted in the fourth theoretical statement and as measured by the qualitative content analysis. Certain aspects that need to be improved on will be further described in the recommendations section (section 5.5).

5.3.2.1 Playfulness

The content analysis proved that the Lonmin intranet contained a moderate level of playfulness, as there were certain applications available on the intranet that did allow some level of playfulness to users. One aspect that could be added to further contribute to the dimension of playfulness is intranet competitions, which would be further described in the recommendations section (see section 5.5.6).

5.3.2.2 Choice

The intranet contained applications that facilitate the dimension of choice by means of online vacancy reports, boardroom bookings, My Site and choosing between languages when reading the Lonmin newsletter.

5.3.2.3 Connectedness

The Lonmin intranet added to the dimension of connectedness as it proved to have plenty of internal links between departments and external links that linked to mining related news, platinum share prices and other external information applicable to employees' work.

5.3.2.4 Information collection

The intranet added to the dimension of information collection, as the content analysis proved that information collection was enabled by applications such as online vacancy reports, serious incident reporting, questionnaires, and measuring the amount of hits and visits by the IT department.

5.3.2.5 Reciprocal communication

There were many applications available on the intranet that allowed reciprocal communication, such as various discussion boards, posting of questions and ideas and making requests. It became evident through the content analysis, however, that employees did not make much use of these facilities, and if they did publish remarks, they often received no response. This observation was further strengthened by middle management's responses (see section 5.4.5). Therefore, it could be concluded that the intranet contributed moderately to poor to the dimension of reciprocal communication.

Generally, most of the interactive dimensions were applied to the Lonmin intranet. The intranet contained applications associated with the dimension of playfulness, choice, connectedness and information collection. However, the dimension of reciprocal communication was not successfully achieved on the Lonmin intranet – the absence of this dimension highlighted a crucial shortcoming with regard to two-way symmetrical communication patterns. The following section describes how the specific two-way symmetrical principles as highlighted by Kent and Taylor (1999) were applied to the Lonmin intranet.

5.3.3 The intranet's application of two-way symmetrical communication principles

This section concludes the contribution of the Lonmin intranet to two-way symmetrical communication principles as identified in the fifth theoretical statement and as measured by the qualitative content analysis.

5.3.3.1 Dialogic/feedback loop

As theory indicated the reciprocal dimension of interactivity and the dialogic/feedback loop is in principle very much the same, therefore the conclusion of section 5.3.2.5 would not be repeated. In theory the dimension of reciprocal communication makes it possible for a dialogic/feedback loop to be present on an intranet, but this was not the case with the Lonmin intranet. To conclude, the Lonmin intranet did not contribute to the dialogic/feedback loop principle. Even though two-way symmetrical applications existed on the intranet, these applications were under-utilised and did not facilitate online dialogue.

5.3.3.2 Generation of return visits

The intranet did update content frequently. This was visible through the flagging of new documents and the dates published next to content. Although new content was published, old content was never removed and the intranet lacked a proper functioning archiving system to store old documents. The intranet therefore did contain applications associated with the principle of generation of return visits.

5.3.3.3 Usefulness of information

Although there was not a wide variety of content available, content tended to be cluttered on the intranet and in some cases seemed redundant. The content almost seemed too much, although in some cases there were still empty pages with no content. Some inaccuracies were also picked up through the content analysis. The relevancy or usefulness of content could only be accurately determined through the semi-structured interviews with middle management (see section 5.4.6). To conclude, then, the intranet only contributed moderately to the principle of usefulness of information.

5.3.3.4 Intuitiveness/ease of interface

The intranet did contribute to the principle of intuitiveness/ease of interface in terms of visual design, although attention must be given to the home-page and some annoying animations. With regard to structure, user-friendliness and navigation, however, the intranet did not contribute to this principle at all. The intranet was difficult to use, not intuitive and not user-friendly. The lack of an archiving system to store old information could be a reason for this. To conclude, the intranet's overall structure did not contribute to the principle of intuitiveness/ease of interface.

5.3.3.5 The rule of conservation of visitors

The intranet did not facilitate the principle of the conservation of visitors, because the navigation on the Lonmin intranet easily leads visitors astray.

5.3.4 Summary: Research Question 2

If one views the preceding conclusions in the light of the second research question it becomes evident that the Lonmin intranet did apply two-way symmetrical communication principles to a certain extent. It showed applications associated with all five intranet use-modes and proved to moderately add to interactive dimensions – with the exceptions highlighted. With respect to specific two-way symmetrical communication principles, the intranet performed poorly to moderately. This conclusion indicated that the technology itself, if managed correctly and within the right corporate culture (see next section) would have been able to contribute to two-way symmetrical communication to some extent, because there was sufficient applications on the intranet to allow this.

However, the first theoretical statement indicated clearly that the technological and human factor could not be separated, and that an intranet should rather focus on the human aspect in order to be two-way symmetrical. Therefore the conclusions made in the next section will bring a different perspective to the intranet and two-way symmetrical communication at Lonmin.

5.4 Middle management's perceptions of the Lonmin intranet with respect to two-way symmetrical communication

RQ 3: How does middle management perceive and use the Lonmin intranet with respect to two-way symmetrical communication?

To answer this research question, the researcher was guided by all five theoretical statements. The research methods that were used to obtain these conclusions were the following:

- Semi-structured interviews with ten middle management employees (theoretical statements 1-5).
- Qualitative telephonic interview with the internal communication manager (theoretical statement 1-3).
- Unstructured interview with intranet web master (theoretical statements 1 and 3).

5.4.1 Intranet ownership, management and strategy

Middle management respondents highlighted their concerns that no one really took ownership of the intranet. They indicated that the intranet lacked a visible and consistent management approach. It became evident through the interviews with the internal communications manager and intranet web master that the intranet was not managed by the communication department. Neither did it form part of the communication strategy yet because of more serious and vital communication issues in the organisation (see section 5.4.4). When viewed in the light of the third theoretical statement it was clear that a functional strategic approach was followed to the intranet, where *applications* were valued more than *end results* (Tredinnick & Tilly, 2001). An operational strategy was not followed to the Lonmin intranet and therefore it was unable to contribute to two-way symmetrical communication.

5.4.2 Intranet marketing

Respondents held the perception that the intranet was not marketed sufficiently in the organisation. The communication benefit of the intranet was not communicated to employees. These responses were another indication of the lack of an operational strategy followed to intranet management.

5.4.3 Intranet training

With the launch of the intranet no proficient training was provided to employees. Respondents perceived the intranet as complex and difficult to use and highlighted their need for more effective intranet training. When viewed in the light of the first theoretical statement it becomes evident that the technological focus of the intranet weighed too

much, concluding that this was another reason why the intranet did not contribute to two-way symmetrical communication.

5.4.4 Lonmin's internal communication

The internal communication manager highlighted that there were serious communication issues to solve in Lonmin. The remnants of an authoritative culture that dominated the organisation for decades were still visible in many of the internal communication patterns of the organisation. There was more than enough evidence from middle management to illustrate the serious lack of a healthy internal communication climate. Authoritative approaches were still visible even in the way the intranet was managed. Official communication sources were not trusted, interdepartmental collaboration was limited, employees felt as if they were not involved in organisational decisions (with regard to the intranet and the organisation in general) and the corporate culture did not encourage open communication, innovation and change. All these factors indicated that Lonmin's communication climate was not correlating with the principles of the Excellence theory (Grunig, Grunig & Dozier, 2002). Many employees as well as the internal communication manager highlighted that the intranet would not be truly effective, if there is not a complete shift in the corporate culture of the organisation. A medium such as the intranet is not a wonder cure to solve deep rooted internal communication deficiencies.

A critical finding that derived from this study is that an intranet as a mediated source of communication could not contribute to two-way symmetrical communication if the organisation's communication climate does not facilitate two-way symmetrical communication. The fact that it is strategically managed according to two-way symmetrical communication principles, with interactive applications and high intranet use-modes, could perhaps assist in contributing to two-way symmetrical communication, but could not solve the deeper roots of the problem.

5.4.5 Middle management's perception of the intranet's function and interactivity dimensions

Management respondents indicated that they used the intranet predominantly for accessing published documents and accessing general company news. They found that the flow of messages on the intranet was predominantly one-way, where the organisation pushed out the bulk of company information to employees (an action associated with the public information model of public relations). Higher use-mode applications and interactive applications on the intranet were used to a very limited extent.

The first theoretical statement indicated that discrepancies might start to occur between the applications available on an intranet and the actual usage thereof if the intranet's focus is too technological and if training is not provided to employees (Banck & Nyström,

2005). This was clearly the case with Lonmin's intranet. Although higher use-modes and interactive dimensions existed on the intranet (as highlighted in sections 5.3.1 and 5.3.2), true interactivity and two-way symmetry were not achieved. It seems as if technological connectivity was obtained, but not organisational connectivity. Panteli, Tsiourva and Modelly (2005) indicated that both the former and the latter needs to present in order for true interactivity to be present on webbed technology.

Therefore, although these use-modes and applications were visible on the intranet to some extent, respondents definitely did not perceive them as contributing to two-way symmetrical communication in the organisation.

5.4.6 Middle management's perceptions of the Lonmin intranet in terms of two-way symmetrical principles

The intranet did not add to the dialogic/feedback loop principle, because respondents did not use the dialogical tools on the intranet. Neither was there a communication person to answer in employees' concerns and questions with regard to any organisational issues.

Management regarded the flagging of new documents as a very valuable and useful method to generate return visits. Yet, they found this only to be effective on the home page and indicated that they needed a more effective way to be notified of new content on the rest of the pages. As with the content analysis, middle management indicated that they had a problem with the fact that old content was never removed and tended to clutter the intranet. The concern of not having a proper functioning archiving system was highlighted and supported by the content analysis results. The intranet only contributed moderately to this principle.

Although the majority of middle management respondents indicated that they were satisfied with the relevancy of content on the intranet (usefulness of information principle), they also highlighted their frustration with redundant content. It became evident that quantity of content weighed more than quality. Although employees said that they found the content relevant, one almost got the impression that they used the intranet only on the surface. It may therefore be assumed that the content was not very relevant, because employees did not use the intranet that regularly and seldom used content that was related to their daily work functioning. Although some of the documents on the intranet were in fact relevant, many of the documents seemed to be completely unnecessary and were not used by employees (probably also because of the lack of a proper archiving system) and employees' true needs for content were not always answered. Employees also complained about empty pages and inaccuracies on the intranet. They tended to doubt and mistrust the accuracy of the content on the intranet. This might not have been the case if the management of the intranet had more credibility in the eyes of the respondents. To conclude, the intranet did not truly contribute to the usefulness of information principle.

With regard to visual design, the majority of respondents perceived the intranet as acceptable. However, all the respondents interviewed highlighted *serious* concerns with regards to the structure, navigation and user-friendliness of the intranet. These results were supported by the content analysis. The intranet therefore did not contribute to the principle of intuitiveness/ease of interface.

The intranet did not facilitate the principle of the rule of conservation of visitors either because too many respondents complained that it was hard to find their way on the intranet and to return to links where they started.

5.4.7 Summary: Research Question 3

Middle management did not view the Lonmin intranet as contributing to two-way symmetrical communication in the organisation, because of the following reasons:

- Too much focus was put on the intranet's technological functioning. Employees did not receive training to properly use interactive applications, and therefore discrepancies occurred between the existence of interactive applications on the intranet and the actual usage thereof (*first theoretical statement*).
- The intranet was predominantly used by employees for functions relating to a public information model of public relations (*second theoretical statement*).
- A functional instead of an operational strategic approach was followed to managing the intranet (*third theoretical statement*).
- According to employees the intranet did not create true interactivity and many of the interactive applications were under-utilised (*fourth theoretical statement*).
- The intranet, as experienced and used by respondents, did not contribute to most of the two-way symmetrical communication principles identified by Kent and Taylor (1998) (*fifth theoretical statement*).

5.5 Recommendations

RQ 4: How can the Lonmin intranet be improved to enhance two-way symmetrical communication in future?

To answer this research question, the researcher was guided by the findings of the literature study and all the results obtained through the content analysis and interviews (unstructured and semi-structured). These findings and results were used to make the following recommendations in order to answer the fourth research question.

5.5.1 Recommendation 1: Communication ownership

The first and most obvious recommendation to make Lonmin's intranet more two-way symmetrical in future is that the communication department should take full ownership of managing the intranet. A clearly stipulated *intranet strategy* must be developed where the main objectives would be to build and maintain equally beneficial, two-way symmetrical relationships with employees through a regularly updated intranet site, as one of several internal communication media.

It is clear that management (especially communication management) need to rethink the intranet – from the way it is managed and its overall structure, to its content management approach. Although this study did not focus on content management in itself and therefore will not make recommendations with regard to this, it is important that the communication department and the IT department work very closely together on the content management approach of the intranet in future.

5.5.2 Recommendation 2: Needs analysis

Many respondents felt as if the intranet has been “pasted” on their screens, without proper needs analyses and research. An important facet of two-way symmetrical communication is to involve employees in decisions. The communication department must therefore liaise with other departments in the organisation (alliances must be formed with other dominant coalitions, as described in chapter 2, section 2.6.2) in order to determine exactly what content they need on their sites and what information they require from other departments. This was also suggested by one of the respondents. The communication department must meet regularly with these dominant coalitions from other departments to receive information, feedback and content.

5.5.3 Recommendation 3: Intranet management plan

Once the communication department has allied with other departments and identified accountable persons in the various departments to work with (as suggested by respondents), communication management must cooperate with the IT department in order to work on a proper management plan for the intranet. The communication department (as strategic managing department) and the IT department (as the support-services/tactical department) must formulate a detailed plan of how they will work together in future. Each department's duties, tasks and responsibilities need to be clarified.

5.5.4 Recommendation 4: Intranet training and marketing

The IT department has already created a range of interactive applications; therefore, instead of creating more applications, the communication department must rather

encourage employees to utilise the existing interactive applications. Many employees complained that the current intranet is too complicated: hence, the communication department must work in co-ordination with the training department to create awareness of the various interactive applications, to show employees what they could do and to show them how to properly use them. This could be run together with a well-planned intranet marketing campaign that markets the intranet and encourage intranet usage in the organisation. This campaign must focus on changing the current resistance to technology culture in the organisation and must convey messages that encourage innovation, new technology and the benefits that an intranet could have for employees in the long run.

5.5.5 Recommendation 5: Obtaining higher use-modes

Currently the intranet is operating in the publishing use-mode. Although applications already existed that could be associated with higher use-modes, employees did not use them. It was also explained above that training must be provided to employees in order to ensure that they understand how all the applications work and what they have to offer.

To achieve the searching use-mode, the fourth highest of the five identified use-modes, the current intranet's search engine must be re-examined. This study proved that the search engine was ineffective. Therefore with the help of the IT department, the functioning of the current search engine needs to be improved.

In order to obtain the highest use-mode – the recording use-mode – it is important that more research devices are built into the intranet. Communication management could use such applications to audit the intranet and establish what employees' main concerns and problems are in the organisation.

5.5.6 Recommendation 6: Adding dimensions of interactivity

- *Playfulness*

The intranet should obviously not be too playful, as the main aim of an intranet is not to be entertaining, but to facilitate internal communication. However, communication management could launch competitions on the intranet to encourage usage. For instance, a prize could be given to the department with the most interactive, populated intranet site. Another suggestion is to present the training programmes in a more playful manner, in order for employees not to lose interest.

- *Choice*

In order to further add to the dimension of choice, communication management could consider giving all computer literate employees full access to the World Wide Web. Access to the Internet will not only empower employees with information, but it will also

teach them the basics of how an Internet browser works and will give them access to all the external links on the intranet, which some employees are currently unable to access.

- *Connectedness*

One respondent suggested that it would be to the benefit of employees if the intranet could be accessed from outside the organisation. This would add to the dimension of connectedness. Connectedness inside the organisation could be obtained by having an area on the intranet where new projects are communicated and which indicates whose expertise would be needed in the project, as suggested by one respondent. In this way the various departments will be informed of current projects and collaboration are encouraged. It will internally "connect" various departments to work on projects together. Another suggestion to add to the dimension of *connectedness* is to have a content-rich pressroom on the intranet.

- *Information collection*

As mentioned previously, communication management must focus on using the intranet for research purposes more often. It is important that the results must be published on the intranet to show transparency and to *communicate* to employees how their concerns and problems will be addressed. In this way the intranet becomes two-way symmetrical and dialogical in nature, as the intranet is used as a research tool to collect information from publics and *act* on it, not only as the organisation wants (two-way asymmetrical), but also as employees want (two-way symmetrical).

- *Reciprocal communication*

The majority of reciprocal applications on the intranet were never used by employees, among others because of a corporate culture that traditionally does not support open communication and sharing, a lack of training to use these applications and the poor structure and poor user-friendliness of the current intranet. Some of these issues might take some time to solve or might only be solved once the intranet strategy is put into full action. However, a more practical recommendation in the short term is to provide anonymity to employees when they post comments, as some employees indicated that they were uncomfortable with the idea that their names and comments were so "public" and out in the open on the intranet.

Another important recommendation, which was also identified by Kent and Taylor (1998), is that a qualified public relations practitioner must be identified to answer employees' questions and concerns and to respond to their comments about their uncertainties regarding organisational issues. This will change the current perception of middle management that there is no-one who takes accountability of the intranet and to whom they could report problems with the intranet.

5.5.7 Recommendation 7: Adding two-way symmetrical principles to the intranet

In order to contribute more to the generation of return visits principle, communication management and the IT department must find a more effective way to flag new documents. One suggestion to do this is to have a highlight box on the home page or on the different departments' home pages that indicates *all* the new content that has been published recently. In this way employees would not have to search for new flagged documents. The communication department could also send out e-mail links if an important document was posted on the intranet.

As far as the usefulness of information principle is concerned, the communication department must conduct research on employees' content needs (not only through the intranet, but also through other research methods, such as surveys). The aim is to determine what content employees would like to see on the intranet that will help them to perform their daily work tasks. Employees must feel that they are involved in the process. It is important that the communication department liaise regularly with content providers and encourage them to publish content that is applicable to their departments. One respondent suggested that certain employees must be appointed with content contribution to the intranet written in their job descriptions. These identified individuals must then take full responsibility of their intranet sites and must communicate frequently with the communication department.

Another critical factor is that a proper archiving system must be developed to store old information. In this way the intranet will not be populated with information that is not relevant anymore. It is also important to completely remove information that has changed or that has become inaccurate or irrelevant.

With regard to visual design, attention must be given to cleaning up the home page of the intranet. This particularly applies to certain irritating animations and inconsistent fonts and colours.

Finally, the biggest challenge and also the most practical or tactical at the moment, is to sort out the Lonmin intranet's navigation and structure. One respondent suggested that management must structure the intranet according to the new Shared Services model. The communication department must liaise with other dominant coalitions in the organisation when the "intranet architecture" (as one employee referred to it) is restructured. Duplication of links must be removed, content must be added to the pages that have no listings to display, broken links must be corrected and a more effective search engine must be created. One employee suggested that the top menu bar must have a drop-down menu to the various sub-divisions. For instance the mining main link must have a drop-down menu to the various mines.

5.6 General conclusion

The empirical findings of this study indicated that the theoretical principles as highlighted in the study, were not successfully applied to the Lonmin intranet. The following figure illustrates the requirements for how an intranet *should* be managed in order to contribute to two-way symmetrical communication.

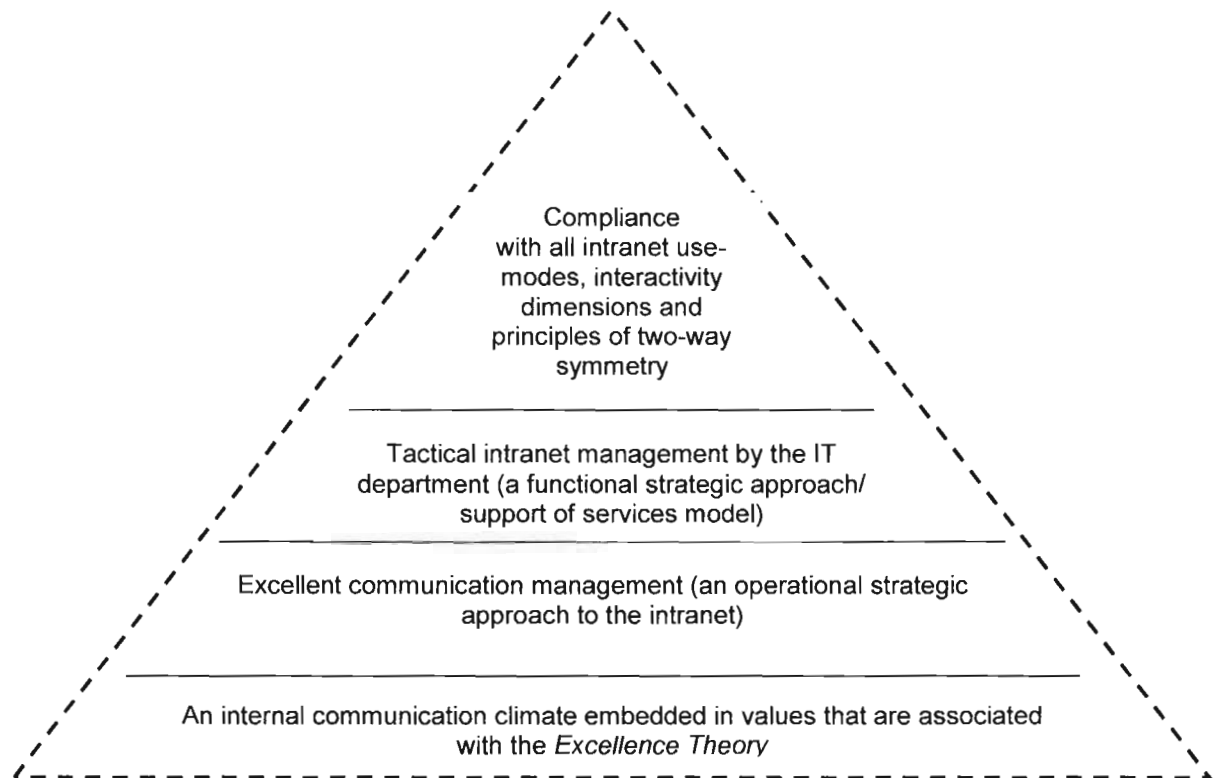


Figure 5.6: Schematic pyramid illustrating the requirements for an intranet contributing to two-way symmetrical communication.

Source: Theoretical findings and middle management's responses.

At the basis of the pyramid is the organisation's internal communication climate. It would be difficult for an intranet, as a mediated communication medium, to establish two-way symmetrical communication in the organisation if the internal communication climate does not promote it. It might to some extent contribute towards this goal if the other levels are functioning effectively, but this level is vital for creating two-way symmetrical communication on the intranet. The communication climate at Lonmin, at least at the time that this study was conducted, did not encourage two-way symmetrical communication.

The second level illustrates that an intranet must be managed by the communication department in order to contribute to two-way symmetrical communication in the

organisation. At Lonmin the intranet was not managed by the communication department.

According to the third level, the IT department must provide a supporting service to the communication department. They must provide the necessary assistance to manage the *technological* aspect of the intranet. At Lonmin the intranet was solely managed by the IT department.

Lastly, the communication department and IT department should collaborate to build an intranet that has indications of all five intranet use-modes and comply with all the dimensions of interactivity and principles of two-way symmetry.

Internet technology is the future of public relations management. The modern organisation's public relations manager could not afford to deny the fact that webbed technology – when applied strategically – could have tremendous positive results in building and maintaining long-lasting relationships with stakeholders. To build relationships with its most strategic stakeholder – its employees – an organisation (either small or international) could benefit greatly from a well planned, effectively managed intranet.

This study served as a platform for communication management to develop and execute an intranet strategy at Lonmin Platinum Mine. It also highlighted all the areas of concern regarding the Lonmin intranet, as identified by middle management. The researcher expects that if the principles highlighted in the schematic figure of section 5.7 are followed, the Lonmin intranet would contribute more to two-way symmetrical communication at Lonmin in future.

5.7 Shortcomings and suggestions for future research

5.7.1 Shortcomings of this study

This study only focussed on middle management's perceptions. Although the research sample was valid, it could also be considered as a shortcoming of the study that other groups of employees were not interviewed. The perceptions of top management and lower level employees, for instance, might have differed from those of middle management.

Another possible shortcoming is the fact that no quantitative research supported the qualitative findings. A quantitative study could have more concretely proven the under-utilisation of the intranet and could have identified patterns for the under-utilisation by means of statistics.

5.7.2 Suggestions for future research

In the future a follow-up study could be conducted to measure the effect of the recommendations that were made in this study. It would be interesting to determine whether the perceptions of middle management have changed after the communication department took ownership and control of the intranet and after a functional and operational strategy was developed and executed at Lonmin.

Another suggestion for future research is to qualitatively measure the communication climate at Lonmin and then to describe these results in relation with the intranet's contribution to two-way symmetrical communication. This study did not specifically measure communication climate; yet it became evident through middle management's perceptions that the overall internal communication climate of the organisation did not facilitate two-way symmetrical communication and this intrinsically affected the contribution of the Lonmin intranet to two-way symmetrical communication. By using the results of this study as a guideline, the assumption could be made that the intranet's contribution to two-way symmetrical communication is dependent on the general communication climate in the organisation.

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Ms N Theunissen

Dear Ms Theunissen

Editing of dissertation

This is to confirm that I have edited your dissertation, *The contribution of Lonmin Platinum's intranet to two-way symmetrical communication: middle management's perception*, and that I have indicated the necessary grammatical corrections. Please check these suggested corrections before implementing them and contact me if there are any queries.

Regards



AM van der Merwe